

---

# Title: The New Perspective - Fruits

**Text: Romans 3:19-31**

*Speaker: Pastor Chad Bresson*

**Introduction** This is the third and final sermon in a series on the New Perspective. I pray you will bear with me, hear me out, and hang with me for the next few minutes. This is not one of those subjects that excites. This is not one of those Bible topics where the glory is evident throughout, culminating in the work of Christ (though this will be touched on, even here). But, as we have seen in our study of Titus earlier today we, both as a church and as elders, have a responsibility proclaim the truth and refute error. And when there are serious errors that threaten the church at large, we cannot assume that it does not threaten this church.

The New Perspective is just such an error that needs addressing. Sometimes our refutation of it can sound technical (and it is a complex subject). Sometimes it seems like we are wrestling over the nuancing of words (and it is certainly that). But taking it on is something that is necessary for the health and well-being of our church.

The idea of an alternate or parallel universe or reality has been a staple in fantasy and science fiction lore for centuries. We can look to our own pop culture for examples: Neo discovers the world is not what he thought it was when he discovers *The Matrix*. Marty McFly spends an entire movie trying to undo an alternate history that changed his idyllic white-picket fence life in Hill Valley into dilapidated despair and oppression. Hermione sets out to save Harry Potter and change a possible alternate history in *the Prisoner of Azkaban*. It says something about the American collective psychosis that we spend millions being entertained by the pursuit of the thought: what if this had or hadn't happened?

Another staple in the suspense and thriller genre is the surprise or twisted ending in which the audience is given one final detail that changes the entire backdrop of the movie. In this context, there is no alternate universe; only our understanding of reality has been changed. Popular movies such as Bruce Willis's *The Sixth Sense*, *The Planet of the Apes*, *Shattered w/ Tom Berenger*, and *The Game* played by Michael Douglas are compelling precisely because they twist our sense of reality.

Our subject matter this evening has a little bit of both, because this is indeed what the New Perspective is attempting to foist on us and on Christianity.

## What if?

What if we were to wake up only to find out that Christ's death and our salvation in time and space wasn't what we thought it was? The New Perspective on Paul wants us to believe, in their interpretation of Romans and Galatians and in light of the theology of the Second Temple in Paul's day, that:

- Luther got salvation and justification wrong. Because Luther got it wrong, he is responsible for leading Protestants astray for the past 450 years.
- How a man is made right with God is not the most important question one might consider in this matter of salvation and justification.
- God's holy and righteous standard was \*never\* perfection or 100% obedience.
- Salvation is not only \*not\* about asking Jesus into my heart (shocking as that may seem), it is also not about being declared righteous before God.
- The atonement is merely about the forgiveness of sin and not satisfying God's justice.
- Christ's death had nothing to do with satisfying God's wrath because God's wrath and justice were never part of the equation to begin with.
- Christ did not pay the penalty for my sin since a penalty was never threatened or exacted, at least for personal sin.
- My good works will have a role in my salvation at the end (even though it is "all of grace").
- The question of my membership in the community is more important than whether I am in right standing with God.
- The gospel is more concerned with uniting Jew and Gentile than it is about salvation from God's wrath.
- Guilt over my sin and standing before God says more about my obsessive-compulsion than it does about conscience because my personal guilt is and never was at stake. If one is participating in the community, one (really) has nothing to be guilty of.
- Grace is for those who deserve it.
- God's judgment is more like an assessment, and it is a judgment that is characterized by grace, not justice.
- Heaven is not a place. Heaven is a frame of mind, a goal to be pursued by bettering our situation on earth (usually defined in terms of social justice for the oppressed and vulnerable).

What if we awoke to find all of the above true about Christianity? Where would that leave us? I know how Scott Hahn would answer this question! This is both the alternate universe and twisted ending wrapped up in one serious and dangerous drama.

This doesn't sound like what the Bible says. This doesn't sound like true reality, at least for those of us raised as fundamentalists and Protestants. Yet this is precisely what the New Perspective would have us believe. We and our 450 years of Reformed posterity, if the New Perspective is to be believed, have believed and have sacrificed life and limb for what was never true to begin with. Like Bruce Willis in that moment of truth, Protestants are apparently confronted with an interpretation of salvation events that don't match what we've been led to believe. Not only are we proffered a new way of understanding our salvation, we are told that this new way of salvation is actually better for our lives and better for the world. The world is a much safer place because once the world has been rid of Lutherization, we will have rid the world of the anti-Semitism that created Hitler. The world is a much better place because without our eyes so firmly

fixed on our heavenly futures, we will finally get down to the business of improving the lives of the oppressed and the vulnerable. Or so we are told.

But... the reality is just the opposite. I would propose that this is an alternate ending that does not turn out well for Harry Potter. This is an alternate history that built Biff's casino. This is an alternate ending that ends in the destruction of the soul. This is a twisted ending that ends without any hope of experiencing or enjoying what is being offered by the New Perspective. What I've outlined in the above is a perversion of the reality; follow that version of salvation and you will find your soul in peril.

Some of us may be tempted to write this off as fringe Christianity as the leftovers from 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal theology. We must not give in to that temptation for one big reason: the New Perspective's dancing partner here in the United States and the United Kingdom is the Emergent Church. One doesn't have to read too far before one is confronted with New Perspective ideas in the Emergent Church. The New Perspective is providing the Emergent Church with its theology. Some may say it's incidental. But it's hard not to notice the increasing capital that N.T. Wright, a New Perspective proponent has been gaining with the Emergent Church. So, while this may seem like an academic exercise meant to highlight once again "how we here at the Chapel disagree with \*those guys\*", I want to assure you that this isn't merely a discussion best left to the ivory towers in the academy. Many of you have friends that are being fed any number of the points I have outlined above. Some of you may be confronted with this or even tempted to go down this road.

We cannot allow ourselves to say it couldn't happen here. We have two major examples of church leaders in the Dayton area over the past five years who, once they began accepting what the New Perspective was telling them was true about their salvation, went before their churches and announced that they were taking their families into the Roman Catholic Church. May we never say, "Oh, not us!"

As your shepherds, we are obligated to protect you from that. We are obligated to teach you and equip you for all good works and for the defense of the gospel. Those of us who study in order to teach and preach here believe that this is no light thing.

### **Brief review: Who are the main players?**

I should say here at the outset that I am heavily indebted to D.A. Carson and Stephen Westerholm, and to a lesser extent John Piper and Simon Gathercole. Studying these men was a reminder that when there is error sweeping the church in redemptive history, Christ, the church's Overshepherd, has raised up men to refute it.

I believe Dale covered this a little last week, but as a matter of brief review, there are three names that would be the main instigators of this movement from the late 1970's to 2008, 2 of which really have nothing to do with us and the third is not only the most popular, but most dangerous (and like we mentioned in the emergent church series, he'd probably like it and mock us that we said he was "dangerous").

The professor who started it all was E.P. Sanders, a recently retired religion professor at Duke University. He wrote a book that turned everyone's head called "Paul and Palestinian Judaism". As Dale mentioned last week, Sanders studied what is now called Second Temple Judaism, or the religion and theology of Jews emanating from the Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' and Paul's day.

If you were a Jew and showed up at the Second Temple to learn from the theologians of that day, what would you be told? You would be told, according to Sanders, that striving to keep the law is not legalism, but a response to God's grace to his covenant people and that keeping the law is the obedience required in order to maintain God's covenant with his people. You would be told, according to Sanders, that salvation is by grace, but staying in the covenant is maintained by keeping the law. Sanders, as a result, makes that claim that Paul was not engaging legalistic Jews who believed that keeping the law would earn them salvation. No... they believed that salvation is by grace and it always has been by grace. Paul's main problem with the Jews is that they weren't Christian enough. They needed to be convinced that Jesus was the messiah and that Gentiles and Jews were now to be united under one religion in Jesus.

Now, on the surface, that doesn't seem like a big deal. So, we have a difference of opinion as to what is happening between Paul and his opponents. What's so totally wrong with what Sanders is saying? E.P. Sanders, by the way, hasn't really ever claimed to be a conservative scholar. So, it's not all that surprising that he may come to some other conclusions about how to interpret Paul than those who are conservative evangelicals. But... it *is* a big deal. More on why in a minute.

Sanders was followed shortly after his infamous book in 1977 by a British professor named James Dunn who taught at the University of Durham. Dunn, by the way, is the one who first coined the term "New Perspective on Paul" to describe what it was that Sanders was saying. Dunn came along and insisted that what we read about justification and salvation in the New Testament, especially in Paul's epistles, must be read as if Paul were interacting with Second Temple Jews, at least the Second Temple Jews identified by Sanders and Dunn. If we do that, then we must admit that these Jews were not legalists; as Dale pointed out last week, these first century Jews, according to Dunn, did not believe that their works would save them. The first century Jews would have made good Protestants. Or so, Dunn and Sanders are telling us.

The third person in this New Perspective "unholy trinity" is a man you may have heard about. N.T. Wright, or Tom Wright as his friends know him, currently is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, which is fourth in line to the Archbishop of Canterbury (and some believe he stands a good chance of being the next Archbishop of Canterbury, the acting leader of the Church of England... even though the head of the church is still the King of England). Of these three, N.T. Wright has been the most overtly evangelical, though even *that* is now being challenged in the current crisis facing the Anglican church concerning the authority of scripture, the divinity of Jesus, homosexuality, the ordination of women, and the like. Currently, N.T. Wright is the lead-

ing proponent of the New Perspective. He has written and spoken extensively to the issue, and has traveled all over this country speaking at various conferences to the issue. And in my opinion, his claim to the word “evangelical” should have been called in to question years ago. The danger with Wright is that he has the ear of many in the Reformed community, for various reasons.

Wright agrees with Dunn and Sanders that the Jews of Paul’s day did not believe that their good works would earn their righteousness or salvation. For Wright, he understands these Jews to have affirmed salvation by grace through faith. Instead, Paul is interacting with those Jews who do not affirm Jesus as the true Messiah and the uniter of Jew and Gentile into one, big, happy family. Salvation, then, is about getting rid of the boundary markers between Jew and Gentile now that Christ has come. Rituals such as circumcision are no longer needed as boundary markers under Christ’s lordship. Instead the Jew is to see God’s promises to Abraham fulfilled in Christ and extending equally to Gentiles. Is that a problematic statement in and of itself? No. But that’s not it.

Wright goes on to say that Paul is not critiquing Judaism per se... only those Jews who want to impose the old boundary markers on Gentile Christians. The problem with these Jews is that they don’t recognize that God’s program for Jews and Gentiles culminates in Christ. And justification isn’t so much about a person’s standing before God as it is about being declared a legitimate member of the community of faith.

So, these three are the main characters in the unfolding drama of the New Perspective. There are other players to be sure, some more closer to home than others... including Don Garlington, John Armstrong, and Scott Hafemann. Making it even more convoluted are the similarities between the New Perspective and what in Presbyterian circles is called the Federal Vision or what has been known as Auburn Avenue theology, the theology of a Presbyterian by the name of Norman Shepherd, and in our own baptistic neck of the woods, Daniel Fuller. All of these share commonalities with each other, even as there are key differences. We are not going to get into this this evening. I merely point this out because ideas that reside in the New Perspective are being touted other places, especially in the Reformed World, in a variety of packages.

But these three theologians – Sanders, Dunn, and Wright – capture the essence of what the New Perspective is about. And to be sure, they are not all saying the exact same things... N.T. Wright has quipped that the proponents of the New Perspective spend as much time arguing with each other as they do with their Reformed critics. However, there is enough collective common agreement among them and others within the New Perspective to identify just what the New Perspective, as a school of thought, is proposing.

The question for us tonight is... how did we end up with such an alternate reading of the Apostle Paul? What texts of scripture support their claim? What texts of scripture show us that keeping the law is a good thing, it is necessary for staying in the covenant, and that such obedience is abiding by the terms of the covenant rather than law-

keeping? What texts of scripture suggest that striving to keep the law in order to stay in the covenant and salvation by grace are not mutually exclusive but perfectly compatible with one another? What texts of scripture tell us that God's ultimate requirement isn't exact, perfect obedience to the law?

Before we look at a text of scripture tonight, it must be said at the outset that the reality is that there are no texts that tell us this. In fact, there is a hermeneutical or interpretive fallacy or problem that we must acknowledge before we even crack a text. It's a similar problem when we are dealing with creation and evolution or the Bible and science. And I know full well that those who are proponents of the New Perspective on Paul are going to vehemently disagree with how we understand the interpretation of the Bible. And the problem is this: the Scriptures are being interpreted in light of Second Temple Judaism rather than Second Temple Judaism being interpreted in light of the scriptures. Rather than allowing the scriptures to tell us what is accurate or not accurate in the theology of the Second Temple (that's assuming that the New Perspective has accounted for all of the theology of the Second Temple and many scholars including Carson and Westerholm say that it hasn't), the New Perspective imports what it believes to be true about the theology of the Second Temple and imposes it onto the text. So, we have a body of scholarship, Second Temple Judaism, being brought into the text in order to understand the text.

As D. A. Carson points out, that kind of assumption is all wrong. Rather than allowing the text to speak for itself, or as is the case, the text to interpret and speak against Second Temple Judaism, the text of Scripture has become subservient to other texts for interpretation. Is it any wonder that E.P. Sanders' views on the inspiration and inerrancy of scripture have been the subject of much scrutiny in recent years with the Evangelical Theological Society? Always be leery of those pastors, teachers, or theologians who use outside scholarship to change the interpretation of the text. That's not to say that the New Perspective does not claim that they are using sound interpretive principles and doing the hard work of trying to rightly divide the word of truth. The problem is that they are biased from an outside source from the very beginning and it skews how they interpret the text. Rather than letting the text speak for itself, Second Temple Judaism is allowed to speak for the text.

## **The New Perspective's gospel (according to N.T. Wright)**

John Piper has pulled together some scattered quotes from Wright about what he believes to be true of the gospel. And here they are:

“The gospel' itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true and only Lord of the world.” Further, Paul's “proclamation” is “that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world.”

So far, so good. Right? Wright doesn't stop there. Piper points out:

“‘The gospel’ is not an account of how people get saved.” “Paul’s gospel to the pagans was not a philosophy of life. Nor was it, even, a doctrine about how to get saved.” “My proposal has been that ‘the gospel’ is not, for Paul, a message about ‘how one gets saved.’” “The gospel is not . . . a set of techniques for making people Christians.” “‘The gospel’ is not an account of how people get saved. It is . . . the proclamation of the lordship of Jesus Christ.”

Now, remember how I said that the New Perspective provides a theology for the emerging church? Here it is. While preaching about the emerging church, we looked at quotes very similar to this from Shane Claiborne and Brian McLaren. This is what theologians call “inclusivism”. As the emergent church would say, salvation isn’t about getting in and it’s not about who’s in and who isn’t. It’s about community... including those who aren’t in.

How can N.T. Wright makes statements like this? For the remainder of our time, we’re going to look at a passage in Romans. The New Perspective is telling us that Romans isn’t about “how one gets saved”. Romans is about the unification of Jew and Gentile under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

## The “works of the law”

However, let’s see how this works. As we read this, be looking for this phrase, “works of the law”. This is one of those texts over which there has been much ink spilled between the New Perspective and its critics. In fact, one could probably characterize the debate between the New Perspective and conservative and Reformed historical Christianity as a fight over Romans. And even though this is a fight among Protestants, the one group that has the most to gain from this fight over Romans is not Protestants but Rome.

Romans 3:19-31

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. <sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. <sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the

law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of 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. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

What is Paul saying here? Is Paul saying that there is no salvation through the law? Is Paul pitting justification by grace through faith over against the law? Historically, we Protestants have affirmed that Paul \*is\* doing this. But should we stop at verse 31? Of course not... let's continue...

<sup>1</sup> What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." <sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, <sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

So... how is Paul to be understood here? Remember I said be looking for the "works of the law" in this passage? It would seem, as Luther understood it, that Paul is critiquing those who believing that doing the works of the law will earn them salvation and that Abraham is presented as a rebuttal for those who think this way. Abraham is an interpretive key for all of redemptive history: justification and salvation are through faith alone by grace alone in Christ. That's what Paul is saying, right? That's what this passage is about, right?

The New Perspective has come along and said, "no, no, no... that's not what Paul is saying." That might be what it looks like, but we and Luther just don't get it, apparently.

You see, if only we had consulted Second Temple Judaism theologians, we would have understood that "works of the law" are those boundary markers between Jew and Gentile. "Works of the law" are those kosher activities and practices that mark off the Jewish people from the rest of the world. Paul isn't dissing the law or getting rid of law-keeping. This isn't an antagonistic argument against legalists. Paul is merely agreeing with good Second Temple Jews that good works don't save us and salvation is by faith. And he is only pointing out that those boundary markers cannot be relied on as the identifiers or "justifiers" of God's people any longer. God's covenant was no longer specifically "just for the Jews". Silly us for thinking that "works of the law" means obeying the law's requirements in order to gain right standing with God. If only we had been privy to Second Temple Judaism.

Which is precisely the point to our refutation of what the New Perspective is saying here... let's pretend we don't have Second Temple Judaism (or the Roman Catholic Church for that matter) to tell us how to interpret this passage. What then? First, "works" cannot be merely limited to those external boundary markers that separate Jew and Gentile. This text doesn't justify that kind of reductionism. When Paul speaks of

sinners who are “under the law” in verse 19, he isn’t merely speaking of the Jews, nor is he merely speaking about being under the boundary markers. He is speaking of “all men” (chapter 1, verse 18) and he is speaking of the entire law (chapter 2:25-26). “Works of the law” mean precisely that... those works that the law requires in order to have right standing with God, most prominent revealed in the Decalogue... the entire law. Obedience to the entire law is what is in view here... and Paul is saying “obedience” cannot justify nor can “the law”.

And that leads to the second observation here... verse 28: there is a mutual exclusion between “faith” and the “works of the law” in this argument of Paul’s. The two, in Paul’s mind, are not compatible. Why? Because obedience to the law, at least the kind of obedience required for salvation or justification is impossible. It cannot be done. It is futile thinking. So much so, Abraham is presented as a foil to those who would suggest that salvation and indeed justification can be had by covenant keeping. One cannot have saving faith and then rely on good works, even obeying the law’s grander point, to save him or her.

So, you see, there is a fundamental or radical disconnect between the New Perspective’s understanding of “works of the law” that do not justify, and Paul’s understanding that obeying the law, doing its works – especially in the Decalogue, cannot justify. The New Perspective is attempting to create, with dubious interpretation, an alternate history of salvation. This is the “twisted ending” imported onto the book of Romans.

## **The dumbing down of sin**

D. A. Carson and others have rightly pointed out that such a view of obedience to the law... that obedience to the law can be part and parcel to the kind of covenant keeping required for justification especially on judgment day... is dependent on a dumbing down of “sin”. In order for one to believe that our general covenant keeping, our observance of the works of the law, would be o-k with God one must dumb down the very notion of sin.

And...somewhere along the way, one must obtain an ability to keep the entire law, and that is accomplished by dumbing down God’s expectations and requirements; and in order to do that, one must dumb down God’s character and the basis or grounds for his interaction with his creatures. And the end result is a change in the way “grace” is defined. You can see the domino effect.

Now, I’m not going to go into all the details as to how all of this is so in the minds of those holding to the New Perspective, because what I just stated touches on so many facets of our salvation; but there are a couple of thoughts that will suffice in this regard.

## **Sin as central to Paul’s dilemma**

If we were to have the time to consider a larger portion of Romans, we would find that sin is central to the dilemma being addressed by Paul in this book. Contrary to what the

New Perspective is claiming to be true of Romans 1-5, Paul has a huge concern in this passage about those who have “sinned”. “All have sinned”. “There are none righteous”. The flow of the argument here into the passage we are considering is that the passage answers the dilemma posed earlier in the chapter. In other words, Paul is not as concerned about boundary markers between Jew and Gentile as he is about how sinners are made righteous. Oh, those things are there. Eventually, Paul will say that Christ’s coming, his death and his resurrection, have put both Jew and Gentile into the new Israel (Romans 9). But that’s not the thrust of his argument here. Paul’s main concern is how Jews and Gentiles together are \*sinners\* and how they, as \*sinners\* are made right with God.

In fact, this argument ends up in chapter 5... how is it that the “none who are righteous” can experience righteousness and indeed justification? Not just justification, but eternal “life”? By the obedience of one! Sinners are made righteous, not by keeping covenant – because doing so is impossible – but, according to Romans 5:16, by being given grace and “the free gift of righteousness” that brings the sinner’s justification or right standing before God. Jew and Gentile sinners alike are given right standing with God, not because they kept the law, but because Someone Else did on their behalf. The law demanded obedience for right standing. Jew and Gentile failed, but Christ was supremely obedient.

Justification and salvation are not merely bound up with the question of boundary markers and the relationship between Jew and Gentile. Justification and salvation are primarily bound up with the dilemma posed by the fall of man in the garden (which is why this argument of Paul’s in Romans 3 begins in Creation in Romans 1!) The dilemma posed by sin must be taken seriously. Sin keeps a potential covenant member outside of covenant. Sin makes right standing with God impossible. The question for Paul really is: how is the sinner made righteous? That’s what the text is telling us. And Romans 5 answers the question for us.

## **The alteration of God’s requirements**

The second thought is this... the dilemma of sin has been minimized because the requirements for right standing with God have been altered. There are a couple of ways this is accomplished in New Perspective thinking, both of which, again, are interpreted in the light of Second Temple Judaism, rather than as how the text is making its case. This is going to sound like I am proof texting here and I suppose I am for the moment... so be it... Matthew 5:48 tells us that we are to be “perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That thought provides the backdrop for the dilemma posed by sin in Romans. It is a thought that is inherent to the law, which is why Christ brings it up in the Sermon on the Mount, where he provides not only a corrective in thinking about the law, but presents himself as the fulfillment of the law and as a Supreme Lawgiver who not only gives law, but must be obeyed. The standard, if the law is to be obeyed in order to have right standing with God, is perfection.

When the rich young ruler asks Christ what he must do to inherit eternal life, Christ not only says “keep the commandments” (and by implication he is saying “all” of the commandments), but he also says “if you would be perfect, go sell what you possess” (Matthew 19:16-21). James tells us if we keep the whole law, yet offend in one point, we are guilty of all of it (James 2:10). Paul affirms the law’s basic requirement, “do this and live” when he says “the person who does the commandments shall live by them” (Romans 10:5). Paul also say the person who does not do “all” of the things commanded in the law is “cursed” (Galatians 3:10). The law itself said that “life” only comes through perfect obedience and that anything less than perfect warrants being cut off from the covenant. It seems pretty straightforward... the law requires perfect obedience. And anything less is worthy of death. Silly us. Again, we have not consulted Second Temple Judaism.

This view of “perfect obedience” in order to have right standing with God presents quite a dilemma for the New Perspective, not to mention those Second Temple Jews who seemingly believe that covenant keeping for right standing with God is not only proper but also possible. The impossible dilemma is solved a couple of ways by the New Perspective... first, the word “perfect” is diluted by an insistence that it is better rendered “complete”, or “upright”, since Judaism really had no concept of perfect obedience, but did speak qualitatively of “completeness” or “uprightness” in reference to covenant keeping. Thus, “perfect” supposedly does not mean “perfect” in the sense that we think of it... as 100%, absolute, without-flaw perfection. One could be considered “upright” in terms of the law, even though one may not have kept the law in all of its exact and precise detail. In other words, the New Perspective would have us believe that the law did not come with an expectation of perfect obedience. Right standing with God, according to the New Perspective, was never conditioned on perfectly keeping the law. One can “miss the mark”, as Paul says in Romans 3:23, and yet be considered a covenant keeper.

But this is not the way that the scriptures present this idea of “perfect”, even if it is understood as “complete” or “upright”. In fact, even in this day and age of new translations, translators continue to use the word “perfect” in our English Bibles precisely because \*that\* is the sense of the word in those passages. Even given the opportunity to change our understanding of the word in light of the Second Temple, translators haven’t fallen for it. The dilemma posed in Romans 3:10 still stands... the one who is a “sinner” or “less than complete” or one who has “missed the mark” is \*not\* in a right standing with God. In fact, the expectation of Christ in both Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount and in his conversation with the rich young ruler is that there is \*no one\* who is complete, there is \*no one\* who is “upright as the Father is upright”. And in fact, those who are less than complete not only have no right standing with God, but are in fact in line to receive eternal condemnation and damnation (Romans 5 and Romans 8). So, even nuancing “perfect” doesn’t get the New Perspective off of the hook.

The other, more serious, way that the New Perspective deals with the dilemma of perfect obedience for right standing with God, is an outright denial that God’s forensic justice is anywhere present in his dealings with men. In other words, God nowhere ever

exacts perfect obedience from men as a prerequisite for relationship with them. Sin is not a problem or an issue between God and men because he doesn't make it a problem or an issue. The result is that the entire courtroom motif, especially in the Old Testament, with all of its judicial language, is virtually wiped off the board. God, according to the NPP, deals with men only through the rubric of "love". (By the way, this is why John Piper has two chapters in his new book dealing with this issue has two chapters dealing with courtroom language. One cannot get away from the dominant courtroom motif in the Old Testament).

Now, this is not a problem unique to the New Perspective. This anti-judicial thought dominates the liberal theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And given that at least Dunn and Sanders are to be found within the liberal school of thought, this is, to some extent, to be expected. We would perfectly justified in asking ourselves, "which came first: this liberal, distorted view of God's love and justice or the New Perspective's understanding of God's love and justice?"

## **N.T. Wright's view of justification**

Such a view of God's justice leads to statements like this from N.T. Wright:

"Justification is not how someone becomes a Christian. It is the declaration that they have become a Christian." "Justification' in the first century was not about how someone might establish a relationship with God. It was about God's eschatological definition, both future and present, of who was, in fact, a member of his people." "[Justification] was not so much about 'getting in', or indeed about 'staying in', as about 'how you could tell who was in'. In standard Christian theological language, it wasn't so much about soteriology as about ecclesiology; not so much about salvation as about the church."

But that's the whole purpose of Romans 5. In fact, Paul begins the chapter with the statement that since we have been "justified" by faith, we have "peace" with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Contrary to how the New Perspective would read this, taking this at face value, the peace here is not between Jew and Gentile, but with God. Paul is talking about a means toward salvation... it is the justification that has created the peace with God.

## **God's justice as fundamental to salvation**

As I look at this entire issue, I've come to the conclusion that this issue of God's justice and its relationship to justification may be ground zero in our response to the New Perspective, as anti-intellectual as it sounds. All that is required to show that the New Perspective on Paul is really the Distorted or Perverted Perspective on Paul, when it comes to this matter of justification, is to show from Scripture God's justice in his interaction with men, including interaction through covenanting with men, especially the nation of Israel. It is God's justice, emanating from his holy character, that makes "sin" the dilemma that it is. God isn't merely "love", to quote 1 John. To also quote 1 John, God

is also "light". That light demands a justice and that justice creates a dilemma for fallen man that can only be rectified in an atonement that satisfies that justice. You can see where these dominoes begin to fall.

If one reads through all of the material, their response to how we understand God's justice as it relates to his dealings with men, especially Israel, is this: what kind of a God would exact from his people an obedience with a standard he knows they will never be able to keep... if that standard is indeed perfect obedience? Ultimately, these men play the morality card. The fallacy in this is quite simple: they are holding God to their own standard of justice. This again speaks to their failure to account for the Bible as an inspired and inerrant book that exists independently of their interpretations. Always be skeptical of any question that begins with "what kind of God?", even in our conservative circles. We cannot begin to invoke God's morality against him.

## **A God who demands perfect obedience**

There's much, much more that can be said at this point, especially as it relates to the New Perspective on the Cross and the New Perspective on Moses and the law. But to answer this question "What kind of God...", I think we should Paul's cue in Romans 1 and go back to the garden... even though there are so many places we could land. But I think, there is a picture drawn for us in story form, one that is grounded in our history. It becomes a really simple picture by which the New Perspective, and not coincidentally, the Second Temple Jews of Christ's day, are found to be lacking. In one fell swoop, it does away with all of their arguments. The more I study this issue, the more I study the law of Moses and its requirements and the sacrificial system, and the more I study the cross and its atonement, the more I'm convinced that all of this is encapsulated in one shadowy picture at the very beginning of our existence. And for those postmoderns who seemingly like to complain that we Reformed folk make too much of Paul and spend too much time studying Paul, here we have a nice little picture story that paints a verbal picture for those who aren't inclined to bother with text.

What kind of a God would demand perfect obedience if in fact he knew we couldn't do it? It's the kind of a God who demanded perfect obedience when there was the possibility of man actually doing it. Genesis chapter 2 verse 15:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Here is the command and a promise to go with the command: you shall not eat and when you eat, you will die (kind of interesting that God doesn't say "if" you eat of it). Do not eat, or die. That's the flow of this command and promise. And we know what happened. Adam and Eve ate of the tree. The question then is: will God keep his promise? Chapter 3, verse 14:

14The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." 16To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." 17And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Adam and Eve sin. God hands out punishment to the Serpent, Eve, and Adam. Along the way, God promises a Savior who will rectify the situation. But what about the promise? What happened to "if you eat, you die"? Has God kept his promise? Has man been let off the hook in being allowed to live? Many, especially in our Reformed circles, point to the great protoevangelion, the very first gospel, in Genesis 3:15 as a future death that will satisfy the promise. We point out that man begins to die, and we are also quick to point out that there was a "spiritual" death. Man died spiritually. He was cut off from his creator and placed on the road to damnation.

However, this is only partly correct. The promise of a future seed who will be bruised by the serpent doesn't tell the whole story of what happened in the garden. Further, I think we do a grave disservice to the force of the text as it is unfolding in redemptive history if we are going to make the claim that God meant "spiritual" death, or separation from God, when he promised that Adam would die. And it also loses its force if we walk away from this with the view that "well, Adam began to die physically". Is that what was promised? Is that what we are to think God means in Genesis 2:15-17?

The subtle flaw here in our thinking is that the protoevangelion doesn't end in verse 15. We have to keep reading. Verse 21 belongs with Genesis 3:15.

20The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. 21And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

What was their dilemma when God came walking in the cool of the garden? What did they identify as their problem? What rolls off of their lips? They were naked. They understood the force of the dilemma of sin, a dilemma that carries Paul's argument in Romans. God answers the dilemma of sin.

## God's justice is promise-keeping

Now, I ask you again... what kind of God would demand perfect obedience if he knew we could never do it? The answer is: the kind of a God whose perfect justice \*demands\* that he keep his promises. The promise kept means that the death of this animal whose skin covers Adam and Eve, is the beginnings in redemptive history of a substitutionary atonement, a life for life exchange, the life of the animal exchanged for the life of Adam... and a death that is in lieu of a full and final \*death\* in which Adam's life is exchanged for Christ's.

This death that should have been Adam's is executed on an animal and applied to Christ. Why? Because in the day that Adam sinned, God promised that Adam would die. God's justice demands perfect obedience. And when that obedience is not given, God must be true to His promise. In God's provisional atonement, for Adam to walk out of that garden alive and God's promises to stand someone would have to die. God was not going to allow by-gones to be by-gones, which is how the New Perspective treats the whole subject of atonement. Either Adam would die. Or Christ would die. And the animal died, in anticipation of Christ.

A penalty was exacted. God's justice was satisfied (temporarily). Adam left the garden alive, but it was at the cost of a life. Adam's sin cost Christ his life because God's justice in his original promise in the garden and command that went with it had to be satisfied. This is the exactness of God's justice. This is the seriousness of sin.

Paul sees the events of the garden in the light of God's justice. Romans 5 is where the argument of Romans 3 is headed. Verses 12 and 18:

“...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin... as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.” (Romans 5:12, 18)

At the end of the day, the New Perspective simply cannot explain why these verses are true. These verses are true because a life was exchanged for a life in a forensic or judicial transaction because of God's justice. This isn't merely metaphor. The exchange is very real. Nor is this simply about erasing boundary markers between Jew and Gentile. Paul is answering the dilemma posed in the beginning of his book and answering Job's cry for all mankind in the courtroom of heaven: how can a man be in the right with God? What is necessary for man's righteousness? Paul answers with Christ's perfect substitutionary atonement that satisfied God's justice, an atonement that is applied to us in grace and mercy through no works of our own.

If you want to answer the New Perspective, take it back to the garden. And then take it to Romans 5. Christ's perfect obedience and his substitutionary atonement are found in the shadows of the garden and explain in all of their glory in Romans 5.

Back to our original question, what if we were to wake up only to find out that Christ's death and our salvation in time and space wasn't what we thought it was? The answer to this question is not heartening. If it is true, we really are facing despair and oppression. It's not Paul that can't be trusted. God can't be trusted. God makes promises that he does not keep. His justice is non-existent and, ironically, leaves us without any moral grounds for pursuing justice on earth.

But the good news is that the reality hasn't changed. We do not wake up to an alternate universe from the one preserved in the gospel as it was defended by Luther and the Reformers. God has preserved the gospel in the Reformation.

These passages in Romans, and Galatians, and Hebrews, and Colossians over and over again explain to us that:

- Luther got it right. He has not led Protestantism astray; in fact, he was part of God's grand corrective over a massive error concerning justification.
- The creature's right standing before the Creator is fundamental to the gospel because the creature's right standing was inherent to his and her original creation.
- God's holy and righteous standard was always perfection or 100% obedience.
- Justification is an objective declaration that judicially places a man in right standing before God, not about vindicating a man's relationship in his community.
- While the atonement of Christ's death which was picture in the atonement sacrifices of the Old Testament grants us forgiveness from our sins, it is not merely a matter of allowing bygones to be bygones. Forgiveness, as much as we must have it in order to be right with God, is only half of the atonement reality. Forgiveness is only granted the sinner when God's justice has been satisfied. Further, Christ's atonement provides us with the righteousness necessary to rightly stand before God.
- Christ's death has everything to do with satisfying God's wrath because God's justice was part and parcel to his relationship with his creatures from the very beginning.
- Christ paid the penalty for my sin. The penalty was death. Christ's death satisfied the penalty demanded by God's justice. Christ's life has been judicially exchanged for my own.
- Good works will have no role in our salvation at the end, because grace precludes any good works.
- Membership in the community is important. However, one cannot be part of the community until the question of one's right standing before God has been rectified. The latter is prior to the former (the implications of which one would think would give our paedobaptist brethren pause).
- Salvation in the grand scheme of redemptive history does unite Jew and Gentile. The New Perspective on Paul has made sure we are cognizant of this. However, the Romans passages we looked at tonight make it clear: it is impossible for Jew and Gentile to be united if Jew and Gentile have not been judicially declared righteous on the grounds of Christ's imputed righteousness.

- Guilt is not merely a designation for the disobedience of corporate Israel in the text. Romans treats guilt as if it were a condition of the individual who is \*not\* in right standing with God. Luther threw ink wells at the devil over guilt of sin that was as real as the pulpit from which I preach. Internal angst over guilt is the backdrop for Romans 7, which occurs in the midst of this argument that Paul is making about the creature's guilt in his standing before God.
- If grace is deserved, it is no longer grace. Our salvation by grace, according to Ephesians 2, is not the result of \*any\* works. That salvation includes justification. Grace is contrasted with works. Grace is the antithesis of works (and of course, the New Perspective isn't all that keen on finding antithesis in Paul).
- God's judgment is the result of and has as its aim His own justice. Grace is found in the provisions that meet the requirements of God's justice and then given as a gift to the sinner. Our "coming boldly before the throne" is certainly an activity that has been granted and enabled by grace. But grace itself is a gift in spite of the judgment. It does not preclude God's justice.
- And, we didn't deal with this tonight, but heaven most certainly has temporal and spatial qualities to it. It is certainly of another realm. But it is what is above and what is in our future that sustains the life we now live in Christ. In Time Magazine recently, N.T. Wright pretty much denied that heaven is a place. But heaven is as real as the original garden. Heaven is a place for guilty sinners who are not wearing the skins of an animal, but the imputed robes of Christ's perfect righteousness. Wearing a righteousness that is not their own, these guilty sinners are following their Savior right past the angel with flaming sword at the garden's entrance. But this is not the old garden. We are being given a New Garden. Why? Because we have a Savior who satisfied God's justice.