The only thing that can ground a human being's acceptance and self-confidence is God's gift; and receiving this gift demands the radical surrender of all other self-confidence, the radical renunciation of wanting to obtain acceptance with God by one's own accomplishments. Human existence stands on grace, not on accomplishments.

Judaism also speaks of God's grace. But here grace means God's patience or forbearance with transgressions of the law or the gracious leading that makes it possible for the pious person to fulfill the law or to atone for her or his transgressions. The pious person who fulfills the law—or insofar as she or he does so—has no need of grace. According to Paul, however, the fulfiller of the law is as much in need of grace as the transgressor—in fact, the fulfiller is especially in need of it. For insofar as the fulfiller acts to establish her or his own righteousness before God, she or he acts in principle against God, while the transgressor only transgresses God's particular demand.

In any case, the real sin is not the individual transgressions of the law, but rather the basic attitude of a human being, the striving to establish her or his own righteousness, to boast before God. This is sin because such an illusion impugns the glory of God and does not acknowledge that a human being lives and can live only by God's grace. Even what one's accomplishment rests on—one's insight, one's power, even one's good will—is already God's gift. "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor 4:7)

And that there is nothing specifically Jewish about this is clear from Paul's finding the basic sin of the Jews also in gentiles and in gentile Christians who have brought their old nature with them into the church. The saying just cited is spoken against the Greeks and the Gnostics who are proud of their wisdom. And it is to them that Paul addresses the word of Jeremiah, "Let her or him who boasts, boast of the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17).