

ROMANS 3:21-31 – The Righteousness of God Through Faith in Christ

1) Outline the passage. What are its main idea and key themes?

- *Outline:*
 1. The revelation of God's righteousness and how it is related to the OT (v. 21)
 2. God's righteousness comes to all—both Jew and Gentile—through faith in Jesus Christ (vv. 22-23)
 3. The source of God's righteousness is the gracious provision of Christ as a sacrifice through his death on the cross (vv. 24-25a)
 4. The cross of Christ not only provides God's righteousness for sinners, but also demonstrates his justice (vv. 25b-26)
 5. Paul contemplates the consequences of the righteousness of God (vv. 27-31)
 - a. No one can boast of righteousness by works, because God's righteousness is appropriated by faith alone (vv. 27-28)
 - b. The exclusion of Jewish boasting rules out any ethnic advantage they would claim (vv. 29-30)
 - c. Righteousness by faith in Christ and the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's saving promises do not cancel out the validity of the law (v. 31)
- Key themes:
 - God's righteousness
 - God's grace
 - Justification
 - The cross of Christ (propitiation, redemption, etc.)
 - The relationship between the OT and the gospel
 - In Christ, Jews and Gentiles come together as the *one* people of God
 - The fulfillment of the law

2) How does this passage fit within the broader argument of Romans?

- Most scholars acknowledge this paragraph (3:21-26) as the heart of the epistle.
- From 1:18-3:20, Paul has argued that all people deserve God's wrath and judgment. The law only reveals the sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles. Having shown the sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles, and how no one can be righteous before God by keeping the law, Paul goes on to explain that right standing with God comes through faith in Jesus Christ.
- The saving promises of God have not been fulfilled through keeping the law, because both Jews and Gentiles have fallen short of the God's glory. Nevertheless, God has fulfilled his saving promises through the death of Jesus Christ. His saving righteousness is now available for all, both Jew and gentile, who place their faith in Jesus.
- The gospel is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, whether Jew or Gentile. God's saving righteousness is revealed in the gospel (cf. 1:16-17).

3) According to v. 21, how has the righteousness of God been manifested *now*? What does this mean? How is this significant?

- The phrase “*But now*” signals a new development in Paul’s argument. It marks a shift in Paul’s focus from the old era of sin’s domination (cf. 1:18-3:20) to the new era of salvation. “Now” refers to the period of salvation history inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- God’s righteousness has now been “manifested apart from the law”.
- “Righteousness of God” refers to:
 - God’s saving action in justifying sinners through the death and resurrection of his Son; and
 - The right standing before God of a person who has been declared righteous by God, i.e. justified by God.
- “Apart from the law” means:
 - God’s righteousness is not attained by doing the works of the law; and
 - The era of the Mosaic covenant (= law) has now passed away, now that Jesus Christ has come. The Mosaic covenant was a temporary administration set up between God and his people to regulate their lives and reveal their sin until the establishment of the promise in Christ (cf. Rom. 4:13-15; 5:20; Gal. 3:15-4:7). The OT acknowledged that the promises of salvation would not come to fruition under the covenant with Moses (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27; Deut. 28-30).
- Therefore, “God’s righteousness has been manifested apart from the law” means:
 - Our right standing before God is not attained by doing the works of the law.
 - Now that God has acted to save sinners through Jesus Christ, the era of the Mosaic covenant has passed away.

4) What do the Law and the Prophets bear witness to? In light of this, how should we understand and apply the Old Testament?

- The Law and the Prophets = the OT
- The OT itself testifies to how God will fulfill his saving promises through his Son. It anticipates and looks forward to the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the OT. This suggests that we ought to interpret “redemption” (v. 24) and “propitiation” (v. 25) in light of the OT. The redemption from Egypt foreshadowed the greater liberation that was accomplished by Christ at the cross. The blood of Jesus fulfills what was anticipated in the OT sacrifices.

5) How do we obtain God’s righteousness? Why is it so crucial for us to understand this?

- We obtain God’s righteousness (i.e. our right standing before God) *only* through faith in Jesus Christ. Believing in Christ, not obeying the law, is the means by which the saving righteousness of God is appropriated.

6) Why does Paul add “for *all* who believe”? Why does everyone need God’s righteousness and why can it be attained only through faith in Christ? How does this help to lay the foundation for Christian unity?

- Paul emphasizes the inclusiveness of the saving righteousness of God. It is available for both Jews and Gentiles. God’s righteousness is available to *anyone* who has faith in Christ.
- The inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation demonstrates that God’s promises of deliverance in the OT have been fulfilled (eg. Isa. 42:6-7; 43:5-7, 14-21; 48:20-22; 49:5-13; 51:9-11; 52:13-15).
- Everyone needs God’s righteousness and this can be attained only through faith in Christ because “there is no distinction”, particularly between Jew or Gentile. There is no basic difference among people with respect to their standing before God, because “*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. God created us in his image, so that we might glorify him (cf. 1:21). But we have all rebelled against God and turned away from him to idolatry.

7) According to v. 24, how are we justified? What implications does being redeemed through Jesus Christ have for us?

- Paul uses the verb “justify” for the first time in Romans here. “Justify” means to declare righteous. “To be justified” means to be acquitted by God from all charges that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins. This judicial verdict is rendered the moment a person believes. In our justification, the ultimate, eschatological verdict regarding our standing with God is brought back into our present reality.
- Our justification is a gift of God’s grace. It is entirely free and unmerited. Those who place their faith in Christ receive a right standing before God, not on the basis of their own work but simply by virtue of their faith in Christ.
- We are justified through the redemption that Christ accomplished on our behalf. This redemption is “in Christ Jesus”, i.e. we can only be redeemed through the work of Christ.
- Redemption = liberation through payment of a price. In the second and first centuries B.C., “redemption” often refers to the ransoming of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals. Paul is presenting Christ’s death as a “ransom”, a “payment” that takes the place of that penalty for sins “owed” by all people to God. The word redemption reaches back to the OT exodus and the blood of the Passover lamb (see Exodus 12–15), by which the Lord liberated Israel from Egypt; the exodus likewise points forward to the greater redemption Jesus won for his people through his blood by forgiving them their sins through his death on the cross. Christ redeems us from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13), from the guilt and power of sin (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Tit. 2:14), and from death (Rom. 8:23).

Digging Deeper: What is Justification?

(Adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 722ff.)

Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.

A. Justification includes a legal declaration by God

- Romans 3:20, 26, 28; 5:1; 8:30; 10:4, 10; Galatians 2:16; 3:24
- It is important to emphasize that this legal declaration in itself does not change our internal nature or character at all. In this sense of "justify", God issues a legal declaration about us. This is particularly evident in Romans 4:5. Here Paul cannot mean that God "makes the ungodly to be righteous" (by changing them internally and making them morally perfect), for then they would have merit or works of their own to depend on. Rather, he means that God declares the ungodly to be righteous in his sight, not on the basis of their good works but in response to their faith.

B. God declares us to be just in his sight

- First, it means that he declares that we have no penalty to pay for sin, including past, present, and future sins (Rom. 8:1, 33-34).
- Second, it means that we have the merits of perfect righteousness before God (Rom. 3:21-22; 4:3).

C. God can declare us to be just because he imputes Christ's righteousness to us

- This means that God reckons Christ's righteousness to our account. He counts us righteous, because he thinks of Christ's righteousness as *belonging to us* (Rom. 5:17; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

D. Justification comes to us entirely by God's grace, not on account of any merit in ourselves

- We are justified by God's grace as a gift (Rom. 3:23-24; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:7)
- God did not have any obligation to impute our sin to Christ or to impute Christ's righteousness to us; it was only because of his unmerited favor that he did this.

E. God justifies us through our faith in Christ

- Justification comes after saving faith in Christ (Gal. 2:16).
- But Scripture never says that we are justified because of the inherent goodness of our faith, as if our faith has merit before God. Faith is the *instrument* through which the merits of Christ are given to us. We are justified *solely* on the basis of Christ's work and his righteousness.

8) How is God the Father involved in our redemption (v. 25a)? What does it mean to say that Christ was a “propitiation by his blood”? [Note: NIV translates it as “sacrifice of atonement”]

- Our redemption takes place at the will and initiative of God the Father—he “put Christ forward” as a propitiation. God himself took the initiative to satisfy and appease his own wrath. While the persons of God the Father and God the Son must be kept distinct as we consider the process of redemption, it is a serious error to sever the two with respect to the will for redemption, as if the loving Christ had to take the initiative in placating the angry Father.
- To propitiate = to appease God’s wrath (his holy and righteous anger against sin)
- Therefore to say Christ was a “propitiation by his blood” means that the appeasement of God’s wrath was accomplished through the blood of his Son.

Digging Deeper: The OT sacrifices and Jesus Christ

In v. 25, Paul uses several key terms that are used in the OT to denote the tabernacle/temple and its sacrifices. The word translated “propitiation” denotes the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies (eg. Exod. 25:17-22; 35:12; 38:5, 7-8; Lev. 16:2, 13-15; Num 7:89). The word translated “put forward” or “presented” alludes to the setting out of showbread in the tabernacle/temple. The reference to “blood” in v. 25 is associated with the Levitical sacrifices, especially with respect to the forgiveness of sins. In using terminology from the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16), Paul is making the point that the OT sacrifices cannot bring forgiveness, because all along they simply foreshadowed the forgiveness effected through Jesus. God looked ahead to the death of Jesus as the true sacrifice for sins. Those who revert to the law for righteousness will be disappointed because the atonement provided in the law does not really forgive. Only Jesus’ death satisfies God’s wrath.

9) What does the cross of Christ demonstrate (v. 25b-26)? What is the significance of this?

- The cross shows God’s righteousness. God set forth Jesus as a propitiation to demonstrate his judging righteousness (i.e. his righteous character), which was called into question because he had passed over former sins without punishing them.
- “Former sins” = Sins committed before the cross. God “postponed” he full penalty due sins in the old covenant, allowing sinners to stand before him without their having provided an adequate satisfaction of the demands of God’s holy justice.
- The death of Jesus vindicates God’s righteousness in the present era as well, showing that the forgiveness granted did not compromise his justice. The ultimate result is that God has demonstrated that he is righteous, that his goodness and holiness have not been compromised.
- Through the cross of Christ, God can be just in justifying sinners. God is just in forgiving our sins (cf. 1 John 1:9) and counting us righteous!

- Significance: God’s desire for his glory undergirds his desire to demonstrate his righteousness. By demonstrating his saving and judging righteousness, God has vindicated his name before the world. The plan of salvation is decidedly God-centred—it God is supremely glorified through Jesus Christ!

10) According to vv. 27-31, what are the implications of the cross? What implications/applications does this have *for us*?

- These verse make three major points:
 - No one can boast of righteousness by works, because God’s righteousness is appropriated by faith alone (vv. 27-28).
 - The Jews might have boasted that their obedience to the law constituted some kind of claim on God. There is nothing at all wrong with doing the law. The problem, rather, is when doing the law is regarded as an achievement on the basis of which a relationship with God could be established or maintained.
 - Law in these verses probably means “principle”. The “principle” of faith excludes boating since we are justified on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, not on the basis of our works.
 - The exclusion of Jewish boasting rules out any ethnic advantage they would claim. The oneness of God demands that Jews and Gentiles are justified in the same way (vv. 29-30).
 - If justification is by works of the law, then only those “in the law” can be justified, and God becomes the God of Jews only.
 - The oneness of God was confessed by the Jews in the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4). Since God is the Lord of all, whether Jews or Gentiles, there can only be one way of justification—by faith.
 - The change in prepositions (“by” faith and “through” faith) is probably simply a stylistic variation.
 - Righteousness by faith in Christ and the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s saving promises do not cancel out the validity of the law (v. 31). Faith does not nullify the law but establishes it.
 - Justification by faith does not nullify the law but establishes it. That is, the law itself points to the fact that human obedience to the law cannot save and that righteousness can be achieved only through faith in Christ; Christ has achieved this righteousness on behalf of all who believe in him, through his perfect fulfillment of the law and his atoning death on the cross for the salvation of all who believe. When Paul says, “we uphold the law,” he also affirms the abiding moral norms of the law and thus anticipates the charge of antinomianism (the view that under the gospel dispensation of grace, the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation). Paul responds to the charge of antinomianism more fully in chapters 6 and 7.

11) Based on what we have learned from Romans 1-3, how would we explain the gospel to others?

GOD:

MAN:

CHRIST:

RESPONSE:

Questions for Reflection

- 1) God is perfectly just. What implications does this have for how we think and live?

- 2) To be justified means that God has graciously given to us, through what Christ has done, 100 per cent of the righteousness we need. Why it is so important for us to grasp this truth? What happens if we lose sight of this truth?

- 3) If we are in Christ, we are fully forgiven by God. How does this truth affect how you think and act?

- 4) How does the gospel foster greater humility in us and unity among one another? What would such gospel humility and unity look like? Give practical and concrete examples.

- 5) How does a deeper understanding of the cross of Christ help you to grow in your worship of and gratitude towards God? How does it engender assurance and hope in us?

OUTLINE OF ROMANS

I. Introduction (1:1-17)

- A. Salutation (1:1-7)
- B. Thanksgiving (1:8-15)
- C. Statement of theme (1:16-17)

II. The Heart of the Gospel: Justification by Faith (1:18-4:25)

- A. The universal reign of sin (1:18-3:20)
- B. Justification by faith (3:21-4:25)

III. The Assurance Provided by the Gospel: The Hope of Salvation (5:1-8:39)

- A. The hope of glory (5:1-21)
- B. Freedom from bondage to sin (6:1-23)
- C. Freedom from bondage to the law (7:1-25)
- D. Assurance of eternal life in the Spirit (8:1-30)
- E. The believer's security celebrated (8:31-39)

IV. The Defense of the Gospel: The Problem of Israel (9:1-11:36)

- A. Introduction: The tension between God's promises and Israel's plight (9:1-5)
- B. Defining the promise: (1) God's sovereign election (9:6-29)
- C. Understanding Israel's plight: Christ as the climax of salvation history (9:30-10:21)
- D. Summary: Israel, the "elect", and the "hardened" (11:1-10)
- E. Defining the promise (2): The future of Israel (11:11-32)
- F. Conclusion: Praise to God in light of his awesome plan (11:33-36)

V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1-15:13)

- A. The heart of the matter: Total transformation (12:1-2)
- B. Humility and mutual service (12:3-8)
- C. Love and its manifestations (12:9-21)
- D. The Christian and secular rulers (13:1-7)
- E. Love and the law (13:8-10)
- F. Living in light of the day (13:11-14)
- G. A plea for unity (14:1-15:13)

VI. The Letter Closing (15:14-16:27)

- A. Paul's ministry and travel plans (15:14-33)
- B. Greetings (16:1-23)
- C. Concluding doxology (16:25-27)