

We're Already Justified

Romans 3:21-26

Why We're Protestant #04

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I CAME across a great quote this week that I had to begin with this morning: "I would rather have thousands say to me at the judgment, 'We heard you preach, and you hurt our feelings,' than have just one lost soul to say, 'I heard you preach, but you did not tell me the truth.'" If you don't like hearing about the holiness of God, how your sins are an abomination in his sight, and the vocabulary the Bible uses to describe salvation—justification, redemption, propitiation—then I'm going to hurt your feelings today! And do you know what I say to that? Good! As we continue our series on *why we're Protestant* today the next reason is that *we're already justified*.

The Doctrine of Rome

For the Roman Catholic Church, justification is a multi-step process. At baptism God forgives original sin and grants initial justification. Then there is ongoing justification throughout life as a person cooperates with God's grace. Rome. In fact, did you know that

right now traveling across North America for the veneration and prayer of the faithful there is a vial of Pope John Paul II's blood?¹ Venerating relics is once such good work that increases justification in this life. Finally, after this life and the life to come in purgatory, a person reaches final justification.²

The Doctrine of the Reformation Illustrated in Romans 3

We turn to what one commentator said is “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”³ Children, this paragraph is like a big pile of Legos. If you want to build a biggest and best Lego building ever, what do you need to have? First, you take some of the big pieces and make a foundation. Second, you build on top of that your structure. We see that here. There is a foundational concept and a structural concept.

First, notice *the foundational concept of “righteousness.”* Back in 1:17 Paul said in the preaching of the good news of Jesus the righteousness of God was revealed. Righteousness can either be *what God is* or *what God gives*. From 1:18 3:20 Paul speaks of the righteousness that *God is*, judging

¹ http://www.newspressnow.com/news/local_news/pope-john-paul-s-ii-blood-on-display/article_5e99f41f-2792-5275-8e55-facfa8c9babb.html

² See Council of Trent, Session 6, in *Creeds*, 89-118.

³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 173.

unrighteous sinners. In 3:21, though, he speaks like he did in 1:17 of a righteousness that *God gives*: **But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.**

This righteousness God gives is revealed by God's grace alone.

But now in the gospel of Jesus Christ God reveals his righteousness **apart from the law** so that we can be acceptable to him (v. 21). What God's righteousness requires, he gives. Note what Paul says in verse 24: we were **justified by his grace as a gift**. Paul doesn't merely say we are **justified by his grace**, which would have been sufficient to show that it is by grace alone, but in the original text he actually inserts the adjective, "freely," in between the verb and the noun to say that we are "justified *freely* by his grace." He is redundant to make sure we are clear justification is by grace alone.

This righteousness God gives is accomplished by Christ alone.

Because **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God** (v. 23) and are therefore incapable of being righteous as God requires, we are justified

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood (vv. 24-25).

Finally, this *righteousness God gives is received by faith alone*.

And note that God's righteousness is revealed **apart from the law** and instead it is revealed **through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe without distinction** (v. 22). And again, in verse 25 **the redemption that is in Christ Jesus is to be received by faith**. The end of verse 25 and then 26 seem strange to us, but here is what he is saying: God sent his Son Jesus as a propitiation. In the previous chapters we read all about God's wrath. **But now** because of the death of Jesus we can experience God's grace. Propitiation is the turning away of God's face of anger and wrath because it is satisfied in the death of Jesus so that God's face of acceptance and joy will be turned towards us. Children, if you've read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* you may remember this idea. The word propitiation wasn't used, but the idea was. Why did Aslan die for Edmund? Because the demands of the deep magic said that Edmund belongs to the White Witch unless someone died in this place to satisfy those demands. That's propitiation. God's righteousness must be satisfied. Jesus dies in our

place. And now we are accepted by God. Why? **This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins** (v. 25). God must punish sin. He did that in Christ. Therefore he shows himself to be **just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus** (v. 26). "Righteousness" is the foundation of our salvation.

Second, Paul then speaks of *the structural concept of "justification."*

When God's grace enters our lives and by faith alone we embrace Jesus Christ alone we are justified. In contrast to our condemnation in the previous chapters Paul says **but now** (v. 21) **we are justified by God's grace as a gift** (v. 24). Ultimately justification is God accepting us. We were watching the show "A Football Life" a while back and in one of the episodes a certain athlete talked about how all he ever wanted was his father's approval. This is not just something athlete's want, though, but we want as human beings. How much more so as image-bearers of our Creator to hear him say, "well done, good and faithful servant?" In life, though, we get this approval by working hard, being the best, and doing spectacular things. The problem is when we transfer that to our relationship with God. But look at 3:20: "through the law comes the

knowledge of sin.” We cannot achieve acceptance with God on the basis of our obedience. That’s what makes verse 21 so beautiful: **but now the righteousness of God** that we need in the place of our unrighteousness **has been manifested apart from the law.**

Children, imagine there is a great king in a great castle. He decrees that anyone can come to see him, but first you must put on new, spotless clothes made from the finest materials and when you come you must give everything you have, including your own life, to him. If you don’t do this you cannot see him. You’re a pig farmer. You smell. Your clothes are ripped and stained and they look filthy even after cleaning them. You have nothing to give equal to the king’s glory. This is like what God requires and this is like who you are. But then, in order for you to be acceptable to the king, he orders his only son to go find you in your hut, to take off your filthy rags, to clean you up, and to give you his own regal robe and the title deed to the entire kingdom. This is what God has done for us to make us acceptable to him. He takes away our sins, what we call forgiveness, and he gives to us everything Christ has done, what we call his righteousness. That’s what happens when we believe in Jesus. This

cannot happen by our efforts to work for it. It is “without my deserving it at all.”

In chapter 4 Paul goes on to say dramatically that God **justifies the ungodly**. And he illustrates how from the world of business: **Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due (4:4)**. If you work 40 hours in a week and your employer agrees to pay you \$10 an hour, he has an obligation to pay you \$400 for your work. Then he switches the illustration from our realm of work to God’s realm of faith: **And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (4:5)**. But this is outrageous! “You mean to say that I don’t have to do anything for God to accept me?” Every other religious path is one of works. And that’s the kind of response Paul anticipates. He was accused of novelty that was unbiblical. But remember he said in 1:2 that God promised the gospel beforehand in the Scriptures; in 1:17 he quoted from the prophet Habakkuk that the righteous live by faith; and in 3:21 he says the law and prophets testify of this truth. So here in chapter 4 he gives two examples.

If there was anyone who had **something to boast about (v. 2)** surely

it was father Abraham. In fact, the Jewish book known as Jubilees, said, “Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life (23:10). This is how we think when we judge things **according to the flesh** (v. 1), that is, according to ethnic and outward forms of righteousness. That’s why Paul then says **but not before God** (v. 2), meaning, Abraham could boast before men but not before God. So too with us. Do you realize that the Old Testament describes Abraham as a sinner? Joshua 24 says he came from an idolatrous family. Over and over again in Genesis we read of his lack of faith, of his polygamy, and of his lying to save himself. But **Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness** (v. 3).

Then Paul gives the example of David: the murderer of Uriah; the adulterer with Bathsheba. Yet David the sinner knew that **apart from his works** his faith in the Lord to come made him **blessed** because **God count[ed] him righteousness** (vv. 6-8). Why? Because his **lawless deeds** were **forgiven and his sins were covered** that’s what God takes away in justification and because **against him the Lord would not count his sin**, implying that God had imputed to his account righteousness that’s what

God gives us in justification. This is the structure of your salvation.

Why is this is “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written?” Because this passage is *why we’re Protestant!* Do you see God’s heart towards you today in Jesus Christ this paragraph? God is saying to you that he has sent his eternal Son from heaven to earth out of his deep love for a lost and dying world, of which you are a part. What a God! He knows you must satisfy the just demands of his righteousness, but that you can’t. But in the length and breadth, the height and depth of his love the same Son he provided makes satisfaction for us, in our place, on our behalf because we can’t. What a love!

God’s heart is open to you today as he provides you *justification*
God accepts me as righteousness despite my unrighteousness.

God’s heart is open to you today as he provides *redemption* God
frees me from my sins despite my struggles with sin.

God’s heart is open to you today as he provides you *propitiation*
God smiles upon me because he frowned upon his only Son Jesus on the
CROSS.