

Hope – Righteousness apart from Law

Romans 3:19-31

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In Romans 2 and 3 we heard the massive declaration of the universal and guilt of man and God's inescapable condemnation and wrath. We stand without excuse before a patient, sovereign and holy God. We are all without excuse for through everything He has made and in everyone He has made, God has revealed Himself.

What we have witnessed in recent years in the terrorist attacks on American soil and all around the world simply underscores what the Bible has declared. Further, it is not just Al Qaida who are guilty before God, but so are the morally good people who are sacrificing their lives to try to reach and rescue in the rubble that is left. This is what is hard for us. We look at a weary firefighter who has been on for 24 hours and seen unspeakable horrors and we do not think to ourselves: if this man is not justified before God he will suffer the wrath of God.

How can a so profoundly corrupt and justly condemned people have a righteous standing before God? This problem involves two great questions which are answered through this text.

- 1) How can God remain just and yet pronounce sinners not guilty and righteous before Him?
- 2) How can this righteousness be applied and appropriated?

The Meaning of Justification

(v. 21-26)

To be right before God is the heart of salvation. The doctrine of justification is just simply the answer given in the Bible to the terrible problem of sin. Sin separates us from God and calls down on our heads the wrath and condemnation of God.

Sin therefore has two important components: the moral component whereby we are corrupted and the legal component whereby we are condemned. Justification is primarily the work of God that deals with the legal, condemning component of sin. At the heart of what Paul is dealing with here is the confusion of these two elements. When people try to be justified by good works, they are functioning in the moral arena and are still condemned in the legal arena. *Doing good while sentenced to death will not excuse you from being condemned.*

This is why we believe that the doctrine of justification must continue to be upheld today against all forms of Catholic error. Catholicism (and all its cousins) confuse the legal and moral by insisting that justification is the infusing, the placing into the person a principle of righteousness. They wrongly assert that we are accepted as not guilty based on the moral acts of righteousness we produce as a result. As we will see in Chapter 4-5, justification is a legal declaration of not guilty based on God's righteousness imputed to our account. So we have a righteousness apart from us and separate from us which is put on our account. Moral transformation is the outworking of sanctification: that is, faith working through love.

Righteousness Revealed Now**(v.21)**

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

But now, God's righteousness is manifested. A redemptive historical development is implied by the opening. As Thomas Schreiner wrote that this "marks the shift from the old era of sin's domination to the new era of salvation." (Schreiner, *Romans*, p.221). Fundamental to Paul and the Bible's structure of salvation is this change from the old to the new, the old era to the new era, the flesh to the spirit, from Law to life, from "then" to "but now". This is both in the larger picture of salvation history and in the personal application of individual salvation. At both the historical and personal levels, Christ crucified is the central event and theme.

When does the "now" begin? Through this text and in Paul's writing, the change takes place in the death and resurrection of Christ. Since the cross, God's righteousness has been made visible apart from a law principle. The Old Testament Scriptures witnessed to this event, the manifestation of God's righteousness at the cross. Since keeping the Law cannot bring us righteousness and since the function of the Law was to show us what sin is, then God's righteousness is made visible through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Righteousness Centered on Christ**(v.22-25a)**

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ^{25a} 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.

I know that there is much to highlight and explain in these few verses. They are some of the most theologically dense texts about our salvation in the New Testament. But what stands out to me is the utter Christ-centeredness of this paragraph. Understanding our justification involves truth statements. To defend it against errors means we must think carefully about it as well. But hear me well. Without Jesus Christ we have no justification. Without Him as the center of the Father's delight and thus the Father's utter determination to glorify Himself in His Son; without His own righteousness and holiness as the reality of which the Law and Prophets are a description; without His sacrificial death, standing before and suffering the wrath of God for us; without His glorious resurrection and ascension and reception into heaven certifying that the work was complete and accepted; without JESUS CHRIST, we are doomed and damned.

So I will be fierce in my dedication of holding up my Redeemer and Ruler to be trusted, whose cross is the ground of my justification and who publicly displayed the righteousness of God.

This righteousness comes *through faith in Jesus Christ* (v.22-23). Regardless of who we are and what we are, corrupt and condemned, we have a right standing before God through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul is unmistakable: through faith in Christ by those who believe.

Why is this so? Why no distinction? Why through faith and belief? Because everyone has fallen short of God's glory. Magnifying God is the ultimate standard. Some commentators want to place this "glory" as some form of God's image in which we were created. But I am prepared to say that the essence of sin is self-esteem instead of God esteem, that we seek and serve self instead of seeking and serving God. All have sinned and thus or in this way, fail to magnify God with every thought, desire and deed. I can't resist: this is why Paul is going to say in chapter 4 that Abraham did not waver but grew strong in faith and thus glorified God.

This righteousness comes to us as a *gift by His grace* (v.24). By the sheer grace of God He simply gives us a right standing before Him, declaring us not guilty and placing His own righteousness to our account. And it is a gift, totally undeserved and totally graciously bestowed.

This righteousness is grounded *in the cross of Jesus Christ* (v.24-25a). Two important terms are used to show us the cross. The cross is the grounds of the righteousness of those who believe because at the cross is redemption and propitiation. These two important terms will help us to see Jesus more clearly

Redemption – This word is used to describe the worth and work of Christ whose life paid for our freedom. We are pictured in the Bible as slaves, sold to sin. Jesus's death purchased His people and set them free to be His own possession. The Bible is full of the use of this word and words like it point to what God has done.

Propitiation – In spite of modern efforts that shy away from the cross as a satisfaction of God's wrath, this is what this means. Yes, it was done at the mercy seat and through Christ suffering the wrath of God for us. The wrath of God is not uncontrolled, capricious anger. Rather, it is a settled purpose of punishment against all that is contrary to His nature and demeans His glory. Yet, in His love and mercy, God *took the initiative* to display Christ as the propitiation of His just wrath. Jesus actually took God's wrath on Himself as Isaiah wrote, "He shall see the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied."

This righteousness *is displayed by the person of Jesus Christ*. (v.25a). The point here is that God foreordained, proposed, purposed, or determined that Jesus should publicly be acknowledged and acclaimed as the focus and locus of all God's saving work. We do not redeem ourselves. We cannot satisfy God's wrath. Jesus Christ has. But notice this. God has done this, not to spotlight man in any way, but rather, to call forth worship and adoration and trust and faith in His Son.

Righteousness Vindicating God

(v.25b-26)

^{25b} This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ 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.

Finally, a right standing before God is of little use if God is Himself not just in all His actions, including the justifying of the unjust. In one sense then the word righteousness here does not shift: it is all about being justified. The sinner is declared justified by God on the grounds of the cross. And God is demonstrated to be just through the cross.

So, under the old era (both historically and personally), God passed over sins until Christ came. Until Jesus came and died on the cross, God saved people. He did not save them on the grounds of their law keeping nor the sacrifices they brought. He passed over their sins until the Savior came. He had purposed to make Christ the center of all His redemptive efforts so as to demonstrate to all that He is just in justifying the unjust who have faith in Christ.

So, God is righteous – He is just – He is acting in accordance with Himself when He sets forth His Son as our righteousness and waits patiently for the day of the cross in redemptive history and the application of the cross to us personally. He was just to pass over sins because He had purposed to punish them in Christ. He was patient until that day. And so, the cross vindicated God.

The Means of Justification

(v. 27-31)

Paul highlights how justification is received and appropriated by answering three important questions or objections. Why is faith the way that the right standing before God is given?

Faith not the Grounds

There is much confusion about faith. People often speak as though faith is the basis on which God saves us. They seem to say that God has salvation ready for us and when we exercise faith, when we believe, then God grants it to us. Any say of speaking like this has turned faith into something it is not. We are saved by faith, not because of faith. It is like saying, “This order came via UPS.” Faith is the “via” of salvation.

Faith does not have merit with God. It is not that God has done it all and we provide faith to complete the transaction. Nor is it that faith is the final component to an incomplete work. Not is that faith is turns the metal of God’s work into the gold of salvation.

Faith is simply believing God’s truth and promises. We believe now that Jesus’ work on the cross and resurrection is all we need. Those who believe have already been born from above. John speaks like this as well in **1 John 5:1–5**

¹ Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴ For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Paul speaks of faith as the gift of God’s grace. Now why has God done it this way? There are lots of answers, but verses 27-28 give us the main reason.

Faith Excludes Boasting**(v.27-28)**

²⁷ 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. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [* law here is the idea “principle”]

Since we stand righteous before God by faith, we cannot boast in our works. When what we receive is a gift of trust, then the Giver is the one who is praised. For Paul, any way of framing our salvation through words that leaves man room to boast or glory is utterly wrong. This is the God-centeredness of Paul. Boasting is excluded because faith is the means and Jesus’ work is the grounds. Not our works, but Jesus’ worth and work, believed and trusted. So, the integrity of the good news of a right standing before God apart from our working for it is upheld.

Faith Unifies Jew and Gentile**(v.29-30)**

²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Since we stand righteous before God by faith, then Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, are one in faith. While the Law separated the Jew from the Gentile, the faith in Christ that gives a right standing before God unifies Jew and Gentile. Why is this? Because God delights through placing Jew and Gentile on equal footing to show His Oneness.

Faith Upholds Law**(v.31)**

³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Since we stand righteous before God by faith, then the just demands of the Law are established and upheld and gloriously fulfilled. The allusion here to nullifying the Law and fulfilling the Law point back to Jesus. He did not come to set the Law aside. He is its reality and fulfillment as He asserted in Matthew 5:17-20. The Law described the righteousness of God and declared the sentence of death on its violators. So, while we cannot keep the Law, we trust Jesus for our right standing before God.

Reflect and Respond

The Law has served its function. It has been fulfilled. You cannot be saved by keeping the Law. You cannot be saved by going back to the Law.

One of your greatest needs is righteousness from God...

The issue is a right standing before God.

- The problem is that we do not glorify God.
- The punishment is the wrath of God.
- The provision is the death and resurrection of Christ.
- The principle is faith that believes and bows.
- The purpose is to end boasting and glorify God.

Believe and bow to Christ today.