
The Gospel: The Way of Justification

Romans 3:21-4:25

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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 without excuse for through everything He has made and in everyone He has made, He has revealed Himself.

What we have witnessed in recent years in the terrorist attacks on American soil 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

(3:21-26)

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, imparting, placing into the person a principle of righteousness. Then 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 "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.

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 won 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 Method of Justification

(3:27-31)

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 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.

The Model of Justification

(4:1-25)

These paragraphs almost exactly parallel Romans 3:12-29. They also expand on his response to the objections that close Romans 3. So verses 1-8 develop 3:27-28 and show that boasting is excluded. Verses 9-12 develop 3:29-30 and show that circumcision makes no difference. Verses 13-22 develop 3:31 and show that faith fulfills the Law.

Romans 3 <i>Universal</i>		Romans 4 <i>Abraham</i>
(v.27-28)	Boasting is excluded	(v. 1-8)
(v. 29-30)	Circumcision is makes no difference	(v. 9-12)
(v. 31)	Faith fulfills the Law	(v. 13-22)

In this, Paul is continuing to show the integrity of the gospel and the unity of the Jew and Gentile in Christ. The argument of this chapter is structured along the lines of bringing forward examples of justification and connecting them to important texts from the Old Testament. So, though this larger section began with, “but now” signaling that we are in the New, justification by faith has ever been the way of justification.

Abraham Not Justified by Works

(v.1-8)

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

⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Here it is. If Abraham was declared right before God by the works he did, then he had grounds for boasting. But, the Scriptures in Genesis 15:6 say that Abraham *believed* God and righteousness *was credited* to him. This is what the Scriptures say. That makes it final. Abraham was justified by faith.

Why is faith the way of justification so that we cannot boast? Because if it were given because of works, then it would on the basis of a wage earned. Our works would put God under obligation. It reverses the debt of our sin and makes God a debtor to the sinner doing good. But this is not the blessedness, the happy holiness, of Old Testament saints. Even David in Psalm 32:1-2 understands that God credits, imputes or puts to our account right-

eousness when we believe and stop trusting our works. Do you see the powerful affect of Paul's argument? Hear the two central phrases for the fostering of your faith. To you who turn from your works to trust the God who declares the unjust to be righteous on the merits of Christ, great is your blessedness, like that of David, when His righteousness is credited to you apart from your works.

Beloved, to have a right standing before God you must turn from trusting your works to believing on and trusting in Jesus Christ. Abraham was not justified by works. David was not justified by works. No one is justified by works. But great will be your joy when you simply embrace Christ alone as your righteousness from God.

Abraham not Justified by Circumcision

(v.9-12)

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

In one sense, we do not feel the impact of this paragraph directly. Probably few of you were brought up to believe that being circumcised brought you into a special relationship with God, making you and identifying you with His people. But many in Rome and all over the world believe this is so. The gospel comes to them to say that you cannot have a right standing before God by circumcision. How do we know this is true? Because Abraham was declared righteous before God by faith *before he was circumcised*. The shocking thing that Paul is insisting on is that Abraham was saved while he was still a Gentile.

Now there are huge implications from this simple, Scriptural fact. Two of them Paul draws and I want to indicate additionally.

Circumcision then is a sign and seal of faith. God gave him an outward rite that reflected an inward reality. So the integrity of the gospel is upheld, even in the Old Testament. Abraham is saved by faith.

Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe. God designed and revealed the timing of Abraham's justification by faith so that all who believe are united in faith. So the unity of those who believe the gospel is upheld. Abraham is not merely the father of the Jews, he is the father of all who believe, spiritually.

No religious rite can save. The connection between circumcision and baptism is often used by some to prove that infants are to be baptized and by others, having such a baptism, that they are saved. Loved ones, regardless of where you stand in this issue, know this: just as faith preceded Abraham's circumcision, so faith must precede your baptism.

Abraham was not justified by religious rite. And neither are you.

Abraham not Justified by Law

(v.13-15)

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Paul advances his argument by showing that the promises to Abraham were not a matter of the Law, but of faith. Abraham does not have and is not given the Law. He has a promise from God. Believing that promise, he was declared righteous. If we turn to the Law, we place ourselves outside the promises of salvation given to Abraham, who is the Father of those who believe and nullify faith.

You see, the function of the Law was to describe righteousness and to condemn the unrighteous. It has no power to save. I have most clearly come to understand this in relation to gravity. We have a Law of Gravity which describes what we believe it is, what effect it exerts and what happens when we violate it. But the Law of Gravity in our textbooks is not gravity itself. The words in the text book will not cause you to fall from a tree but they will describe what will happen if you jump from a tree. So, the Law describes righteousness and what happens if you are unrighteous. But it cannot make you righteous. Only Christ can do that. That is the function of the Law - to expose your guilt before God and point you to your Savior.

Abraham was not justified by Law. You cannot be justified by the Law.

Abraham Justified by Faith

(v.16-22)

¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

Justification is by faith so as to uphold faith in God’s promises as bringing us grace, the favor and enabling power of God (v.16-18). Salvation is a promise, a promise to Abraham and to his heirs. Paul sees the words of God’s promise that Abraham would have heirs and would be the father of many nations as pointing, not to Isaac and Ishmael, but to all those who would believe by faith. Yes, there is physical, genealogical descent. But once Christ came as The Descendent and the New Israel, then all those who believe and are in Christ are the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham.

Abraham’s faith also models for us believing God’s promises in the face of impossibilities (v.17-19). This is the measure of true faith. He understood the impossibility of his own situation. But he did not waver in believing God’s promise because he was fully persuaded

about the power and perfection of God: power, in that God could do what He promised and perfection, in that God had staked His Name and character to His word. In this way, he gave glory to God or glorified God. So here it is. There is no Law yet. Abraham is a sinner who has fallen short of God's glory needing a right standing before God like all of us. God calls him out and gives him a promise to be believed and trusted. Abraham believes that promise by faith. Believing God's promise by faith glorifies God. So God credits righteousness to Abraham's account (v.22).

Abraham believed God's promises, thus glorifying God and being declared righteous before God by faith. You can be righteous in God's sight only by faith alone in Christ alone for God's glory alone.

Abraham Justified for our Faith

(v.23-25)

²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

How do we leap from Abraham's faith to our own? The *for us* purpose of the Old Testament is at the center of this paragraph. We are supposed to read the Old Testament in the light of the cross. Yes, there is the Old and New and its accompanying discontinuities. But there are also massive continuities that teach us what it means to be God's people. These things about Abraham in the Old Testament are written for our sake also. The great object of Abraham's faith that he saw so dimly in the Old Testament has now been fully disclosed for us in Christ. The promises that he received of salvation for all people groups, we are now enjoying its fulfillment. And the pattern and example of unwavering commitment to God's promises, power and perfection is a God-glorifying faith.

At the heart of our faith is not a son, an Isaac, out of personal deadness - Abraham and Sarah are way beyond child-bearing age. At the heart of our faith is a resurrection from the dead. Abraham's believing that they would have a son is parallel to our believing that Jesus was raised from the dead. Our faith believes and trusts in the death - He was handed over for our transgressions - and the resurrection - He was raised for our justification. But we must believe in God, who raised Jesus our Lord. So faith moves from facts to trust in God Himself.

You can have that very same right standing before God by faith. Believe in God's promises of salvation in Christ and bow to Him as your sovereign ruler.

Reflect and Respond

So I must conclude briefly.

This is not faith in faith, but faith/trust/believe in God. So much religious talk is about the power of faith. Faith is no power. Faith itself does nothing. It is faith in God that justifies sinners and glorifies 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.

Will you repent and believe God and His promises today? The wrath of God has been revealed and the glory of God has been displayed in Jesus Christ. Believe and bow to Him today.