

Leviticus 16

Psalm 32

Romans 3-4

I’m not going to try to explain everything in Leviticus 16!

That would take a whole sermon! (which you can find on my webpage – www.peterwallace.org – if you are interested).

But Leviticus 16 is important for setting up the doctrine of justification, because Leviticus 16 establishes the point that the wages of sin is death – and that the only way to deal with sin is through death.

Notice especially verse 16 –

“Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place...and for the tent of meeting.”

That may sound strange –

why do you need to make “atonement” for the Holy Place?

After all, all of these things were consecrated and made holy for God’s use at the dedication of the tabernacle.

Why does God say that the Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar need to be atoned for?

“Because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.”

Both the uncleanness of the people AND their sins contaminate even the Holy Place.

After all, what is the Holy Place?

The Holy Place is where God dwells with his people.

The Holy Place is the place where earth and heaven meet.

And every time this sinful people comes to the sanctuary, it is contaminated by their sins and their uncleanness.

Therefore, in order for God to continue dwelling in such a pigsty, it must be cleansed—it must be atoned for—every year.

Only after atoning for the Holy Place could Aaron confess the iniquities of Israel (v21), and make atonement for himself and for the people (v24).

The detailed ritual of the Day of Atonement was designed to show Israel how hard it is to get rid of sin.

And since Israel had to do it every year, they could see that their sin was never finally dealt with.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 32 –

a Psalm that would have worked well for the Day of Atonement.

Sing Psalm 32

Read Romans 3:21-4:25

Leviticus 16 sets up what Paul is saying in verse 21.

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...
(After all, the Law required annual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement every year!)
although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...*

From this side of the cross, it is obvious that the Day of Atonement was setting up the principles that Christ would fulfill.

Over the next few weeks, we'll look at the *benefits* of our union with Christ.

All of the good things of salvation
are rooted in our union with Christ in our effectual calling.

As our catechism puts it:

Q. 32. What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?

A. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.

Today we are looking particularly at the question:

Q. 33. What is justification?

A. Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

In a court case in those days, there would be two parties –
and the judge would issue his verdict,
condemning the guilty and justifying the righteous.

Paul says in Romans 4:5 that God justifies the ungodly.
How can God be just and justify the ungodly?

1. What Is Justification? (Romans 3:21-31)

a. Justification Is God's Act (3:21-24)

The Jews of Paul's day agreed that God was a righteous judge,
and they believed that God would justify faithful Israel and condemn the wicked nations.
God had given Israel his law—his torah—and this law would be the basis for his judgment.
Those who believed his promises, obeyed his law,
and trusted in the prescribed sacrifices to deal with their sins, would be justified.

What Paul does to this is remarkable.

He starts off just fine in chapter one.

He declares that the wrath of God is revealed
against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. (1:18)

He then chronicles the sins and wickedness of the Gentiles,
that no one is truly ignorant of the God of heaven,
and all have sinned against him (1:18-32).

So far, this is exactly what the Jews expected.

God, the righteous judge, will condemn the wicked Gentiles.

But then he turns to the Jews, and says that they are no better. (2:17-29)

It is not the case that the Jews will be justified, and the Gentiles condemned.

No, “both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin” (3:10-18).

When it comes to justification, the law does not help us.

The law condemns us, because we too have sinned.

So in Romans 3:19-20, Paul portrays the whole world as under God’s condemnation.

The legal verdict of the court of heaven against humanity is: “Guilty!”

All have sinned (past tense) and fall short (present tense) of the glory of God.

This is important.

All sinned (past tense – it happened – it’s over – it’s too late – all sinned).

And all *are falling short* of the glory of God (present tense – this is the current status of all people).

But what does it mean to “fall short” of God’s glory?

Glory has to do with your reputation.

In the OT, the word means “weightiness” –

which is often measured in how many people (and what kind of people!) are in your retinue!

If you have kings and princes in attendance, then you are more glorious.

In Greek the idea has a similar orbit.

To fall short of the glory of God means that we are *not* in his entourage!

We do not reflect well on him.

To glorify God is to make him look good.

And quite frankly – we don’t make him look good.

And if all have sinned and if all are falling short of the glory of God, then how can God declare you righteous?

Because you are *not* righteous!

So how can God be just and yet justify the guilty?

If I asked you, “what justifies you?”

How would you answer?

We often say simply “faith”!

But Paul actually gives three answers to this question in verses 24-25.

First, you are justified by his grace as a gift.

The Judge should declare you guilty.

That is what you deserve.
The verdict, “not guilty,” is a gift of grace.
There is no necessity for why God should show mercy.

But there is reason why God shows this grace:

*Only through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood,
to be received by faith.*

So, first, you are justified by *grace as a gift*.

But let’s look a little more at what this justification consists of:
our catechism says that it includes both pardon of sin
and acceptance of our persons as righteous.

Why?

b. He Pardons Our Sins (3:25)

But second, you are justified through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.
Since you are guilty – since all are under the power of sin –
there must be an atoning sacrifice (a propitiation) for sin.

How can God justify the ungodly?

There must be a sacrifice.

There must be a propitiation (v25).

The word “propitiation” (hilasterion) is used also in Hebrews 9:5
to refer to the “mercy seat”–
the lid of the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle.

This refers to Leviticus 16,
which speaks of the High Priest’s entrance into the Holy of Holies
once each year to remove the sins of the people.

“This was to show God’s righteousness at the present time,
so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (3:26)

Sin must be dealt with before God can justify the ungodly.

The first half of justification consists in the forgiveness of sins.

The flip side of this is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.

Remember that Paul has demonstrated that *all* are under sin.

ONLY Christ received the verdict of “not guilty.”

How then could you be declared “not guilty”?

Paul explains this in Romans 5

(which we looked at a few weeks ago, when we discussed Original Sin).

In Adam all died.

Adam was the covenant head of the first humanity,
and in him and through him, sin, guilt and death came to all men.
But now, Christ is the head of the new humanity,
and all who believe in him receive justification and life. (5:12-21)
Because you are in Christ,
His righteousness is reckoned to your account.
God looks at you no longer in Adam, but in Christ.

c. He Accepts Us as Righteous (3:26-31)

In Adam, the many were constituted sinners.

In Christ, the many are constituted righteousness (Romans 5:19).

Again, remember that justification is a legal term.

A legal verdict does not change your moral character.

A legal verdict changes your legal status.

The problem with the OT sacrifices was that they could not fully and finally deal with sin –
or permanently change your status!

Notice in verse 25, how it says that God,
in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

It does not say that God had *forgiven* former sins.

Hebrews will point out that all the blood of bulls and goats
could not *actually* forgive sins.

All those OT sacrifices were not really removing sin –
if they had dealt with sin, they wouldn't have needed to be offered
over and over again!

But that is past.

The time of God's forbearance is over.

God is not content to overlook your sin.

He wants to forgive your sin.

And so he sent Jesus.

And that is the remarkable news about the *present*:

It was to show his righteousness at the present time
(literally, in the "now" time),

so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This, the atoning sacrifice, is the evidence of God's righteousness *in the "now" time*.

All that God had promised to Israel has happened in Jesus.

The Jews were expecting God to justify faithful Israel at the end of history.

But instead, God raised up Jesus – he justified Jesus –
in the “now” time – at the present time.

Why do I mention this?

Because Paul asks about “boasting”?
Then what becomes of our boasting?
Whose boasting?

The Jews were used to boasting that they were God’s chosen people.
And they were.

But Paul says that now, there is no distinction.
All have sinned.
All are falling short.
The only solution is to be justified by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
whom God put forward as a propitiation (an atoning sacrifice)
that alone *deals* with sin.

So what becomes of Jewish boasting?
Excluded!

How?
By what kind of law?
By a law of works?
No, but by the law of faith.

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (v28).
Or is God the God of Jews only?

You see, if justification comes by the works of the law,
then God is only the God of the Jews.
But Paul insists that God is also the God of the Gentiles,
since God is one.

This was the basic confession of Israel:
Hear Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One.

Now, Paul uses this against those who say that God is only the God of the Jews.
No, God is ONE.
He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

As long as you think that you are “okay,” then you are missing the heart of the gospel!
As long as you try to defend yourself, then you do not see the glory of Christ!

The only way that you can be right before God is by faith.
You cannot be good enough.
You cannot do enough things to please God.
If you compare all the good things in your life against all the bad things,
then you are doing precisely what Paul says is *not enough* in 2:15,
where your conflicting thoughts accuse or defend yourself.

That's not good enough.

You cannot stand before God with that!

The only way to stand before God is by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
God put Jesus forward as a propitiation – as an atoning sacrifice.
And it is only through the blood of that sacrifice that you can be right before God.

2. How Can We Be Justified? (Romans 4)

a. We Are Pardoned and Accepted only for the Righteousness of Christ Imputed to Us (4:23-25)

In other words, in the heavenly law court,
when God declares his final judgment,
all of humanity receives his verdict “Guilty!”
And Jesus alone receives the verdict, “Not guilty!”
It is not that Israel is declared righteous and the nations are condemned.
Rather it is Jesus who is declared righteous.
Jesus is the one who believed God's promises and obeyed God's law.
Jesus *is* the faithful Israel who accomplished all that Israel failed to do.
Therefore Jesus is the justified man.
He was vindicated by his Father and openly acquitted before the tribunal of heaven.
Or as Paul has already said earlier in Romans 1:4,
“He was declared to be the Son of God in power
according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.”
You cannot talk about us being declared righteous,
until you show that Jesus was first declared righteous.

The verdict that God declared at the resurrection of Christ was simple:
Jesus was innocent, so God declared him innocent.

That's why Paul starts chapter 4 with Abraham.
You must remember that Genesis is part of the Torah,
so for a Jewish audience, Genesis is part of the “law.”

Paul says that if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something to boast about—
but not before God.

Paul says that even *if* Abraham could have been justified by works,

that would not give him grounds for boasting before God.

In Jewish tradition, Abraham was as perfect as they come.

He was the model of righteousness according to the law.

The rabbis admitted that Abraham did not have the Mosaic law written out for him,
but they argued that he kept it fully anyway!

(Because he was a righteous man)

Paul does not seek to dispute this by saying—hey, look, Abraham sinned too!

Too often we start by trying to prove that everyone is a sinner.

Remember what Paul did in Romans 1-2?

He didn't try to "prove" that everyone is a sinner.

He pointed out that everyone *knows* that he is a sinner!

Everyone knows God.

Everyone knows that God is just.

Everyone knows that they have sinned against God.

And so when he deals with Abraham,

the one whom the Jews viewed as the perfect example of law-keeping,

Paul doesn't try to say "he's a sinner too,"

Rather, he points to Genesis 15:6 and says,

Abraham was not justified by works,

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Paul points out that even the most righteous man who ever lived

was justified by faith, apart from works of the law.

The Greek word here, λογίζομαι, means to reckon to one's account; to impute,
or "to enter in the account book"

And particularly here, we find the phrase "it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

This is a legal accounting.

Paul here sets forth two basic principles:

the principle of works: that of earning wages

the principle of grace: a freely given gift.

And based on everything that Paul has said, it is perfectly clear

that even Abraham – the most righteous man ever –

is justified by grace as a gift.

And Paul then demonstrates this by a quotation from Psalm 32.

Just as David also speaks of the blessing

of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

Remember that Paul had said that the Law and the Prophets
bear witness to the righteousness of God
that has now been manifested apart from the law.

Paul started with Abraham,
showing that the law does bears witness to the righteousness of faith,
because Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.
Now he turns to David,
and the blessing of the one to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works.

*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.*

Notice the three steps of verses 7-8:

whose lawless deeds are forgiven

It might be better to translate this “whose lawlessness is forgiven”
It is talking about our sinful condition.

Whose sins are covered

This refers to the atoning sacrifice which covers our sins.

It is talking about the specific sins that we have committed.

Against whom the Lord will not count his sin

This is the most remarkable statement of the three.

God, the righteous judge, who will not tolerate sin,
nonetheless looks at you and does not reckon sin to you.

Think about that.

Have you sinned?

(Silly question, right?!)

But God, who is unquestionably a just judge, says

“I do not consider him a sinner.

I find no guilt in this man.”

Of course God is *just* in coming to this conclusion!

After all, if your lawlessness (your sinful condition) is forgiven,
and your sins (your actual iniquities) are covered by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus,
then God would be *unjust* to find you guilty.

That is why John will say in 1 John 1,

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful *and just* to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

God is *just* to forgive sins

because he has covered them with the blood of Jesus.

If your sins are atoned for,

if the price has already been paid,

then God would be unjust to reckon those sins to your account.

At the end of chapter 4, in 4:22-25, Paul says:

That is why Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness.

*But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone,
but for ours also.*

*It will be counted to us who believe in him
who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,
who was delivered up for our trespasses
and raised for our justification.*

Saving faith is resurrection faith.

Even as Abraham believed in him who gives life to the dead,
so also we believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.

Paul says here in Romans 4
that your faith is counted as righteousness.

Paul will say in Romans 6:11
that therefore you are to "consider yourselves dead to sin
and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

That word "consider" is the word "count, reckon, impute."

Saving faith is a resurrection faith.

It is a faith that believes in him who gives life to the dead.

And if God has raised Jesus from the dead,
then if you are in Christ,
you are reckoned dead to sin
and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Because Jesus was delivered up (to death – as an atoning sacrifice, a propitiation).

Why?

For our trespasses.

For our sins.

And Jesus was raised from the dead.

Why?

For our justification.

The purpose of the resurrection of Jesus was so that we might be justified –
that we might be declared righteous.
that our sins might be forgiven before the court of heaven.

b. Received by Faith Alone (4:1-25)

And this justification is received by faith alone.

I really like how the Westminster Confession puts this:

“Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness,
is the alone instrument of justification:
yet is it not alone in the person justified,
but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces,
and is no dead faith, but worketh by love. (CF 11.2)

Paul makes it clear that faith is **the** instrument whereby we receive the grace of justification.
But he also makes it clear that this is a living and active faith.

What did Abraham’s justifying faith look like?

When promised an heir (as Paul says in 4:20),

“No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God,

but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God,

fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”

Abraham’s justifying faith was a living and active faith.

A faith that not only assented to the truth of God’s promises,

but then produced obedience God’s commands.

He reflected *well* on God.

Justification is the once-for-all act of God’s free grace.

It includes both the forgiveness of sin

and the imputation (the reckoning) of Christ’s righteousness to us.

If you think about that,

this means that justification is a once-for-all gift

that keeps on giving!

Think about it this way:

if you are justified – and your sins are forgiven –

does that mean that God has already forgiven the sins

that you will commit tomorrow?

Sort of.

What it means is that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ has already paid for those sins.

But that sacrifice is not *applied* to you until you repent!

After all, what does God do every time he forgives you?

When God forgives you, he is applying that once-for-all declaration
that he made in your justification.

There is *one* justification,

but our experience of that one justification comes all throughout life.

The Westminster Confession talks about living in a state of justification.

Just as God declared Abraham righteous in Genesis 15,

and Genesis 17, and Genesis 22,

so also his declaration regarding you has continual application to you,
as you, by faith, continue to walk before him.
And on the last day in the resurrection of the body
God will declare you righteous openly and publicly,
vindicating you before the watching world,
because you have trusted him who justified the ungodly.

So, tomorrow morning,
when you wake up,
how will you look at the world?

The doctrine of justification by faith gives you great confidence to live the Christian life.
You know that God accepts you fully –
not for anything that you have done, but because of Jesus.
You know that God has freely forgiven all your sins –
you are no longer imprisoned by guilt.

You have been set free!