

“GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED” PT. 2
ROMANS 3:22-23

Sometimes things are just not as they seem. [Three years ago](#) a 100-year-old woman only known by her first name, Eisha, died in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, leaving behind an estate worth approximately \$800,000. Her wealth included gold coins, jewels, and a real estate portfolio that included four buildings. That may not sound particularly remarkable except that no one — including her neighbors and friends — expected her to leave behind such wealth because she not only was an ordinary woman, but she was a beggar. According to her childhood friend, “much of Eisha's wealth was amassed when she was begging with her mother and sister, both of whom [had already] died. ‘They used to get a lot of sympathy and assistance from philanthropists throughout the year, especially during Eid [Islamic festivals],’” he explained. This friend says that “he tried to convince his friend to stop begging more than once. ‘I asked her to give up this profession as she possessed a huge amount of wealth, but she always refused and said she was preparing for hard times.’”

So, things are not always as they seem; don’t judge a book by its cover or a beggar by her clothes, apparently. Sometimes there is wealth and treasure where there only appears to be destitution. And that is true as we read the Scriptures as well. Sometimes truths are so familiar to us that they appear to be lusterless; and other truths sound so intellectual and “heady” that we think they are of no real value to us. And it might be tempting to put the passage in front of us this morning into one of those categories.

Don’t. This passage is not only significant to the book of Romans, but it is as sweet as the finest chocolate and as delightful as the happiest vacation. Many commentators (beginning with Martin Luther) have called 3:21-26 “the center and heart” of the entire book of Romans. And one of my favorite commentators goes even further, saying this “is possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.” [Morris, 173.]

So what does Paul say in these verses? Over the next weeks we will unpack the theme of these verses:

WHEN MAN HAD NO MEANS TO SAVE HIMSELF, GOD JUSTLY PROVIDED A DECLARATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH CHRIST.

Here, then, are seven statements about the nature of justification:

1. What Justification Is (v. 21)
2. How Justification is Appropriated (v. 22a)
3. Who Needs Justification? (v. 22b)
4. Why Justification is Necessary (vv. 22b-23)
5. Who Accomplished Justification? (v. 24)
6. When Justification was Accomplished (v. 25a)
7. How Justification Really is Just (vv. 25b-26)

1. What Justification Is (v. 21)

- **But now** marks a transition in this book. Chapters 1-3 focus on the sinfulness of all men; this verse begins a section on the provision of God to save men from their sin. And God's provision is His **righteousness**! What does Paul mean with this term?
 - ✓ It could be the righteousness of God that He demands of all people.
 - ✓ But here **the righteousness of God** refers to the righteousness that God *gives* to His people — it is the action of God to justify and declare right sinners who are not righteous in themselves.
 - ✓ When we talk about justification, we mean three primary events took place:
 - *Man's sins are imputed (credited) to Christ*; though He never sinned, God treated Christ on the cross as if He committed all your sins and all the sins of all who would trust in Him (4:8, 25).
 - *Christ's righteousness is imputed (credited) to us (5:18-19)*. Justification is God's judicial act of imputing obedience to us *without our personal obedience*; He credits Christ's obedience to us.
 - *Though we are not righteous on our own, God forgives our sin (3:25b)* and sees those who trust in Christ as clothed with Christ's righteousness *and declares us to be righteous, forever (3:26b)*.
 - ✓ We might say it this way — justification is God's legal provision for men who are declared to have a right standing before God. God gives us a righteousness of which He approves.
- So God's righteousness is the way He satisfies His wrath against sin (v. 18) by judging Christ for our sins and imputing Christ's righteousness to us so we are in right relationship with Him.
- And because Paul says that righteousness is **being witnessed by the Law and the prophets**, he is implying what he will state explicitly in chapter 4 — salvation in the NT is the same as in the OT — it is by grace through faith. The way to justification has always been the same — cf. 4:2-3 (Gen. 15:6).

2. How Justification is Appropriated (v. 22a)

- How does someone come to have this righteousness of God? Paul tells us at the beginning of v. 22 — this **righteousness of God [is] through faith in Jesus Christ**. The only way to have justification is to have faith — to believe in the work of Christ on the cross. One cannot be saved through his own acts of righteousness; nothing he can do will ever be enough; everything he does will always be tainted with sin (1:18 – 3:20, esp. 2:1-3). If anyone wants justification, he must believe in Christ.
- We want to be careful when talking about faith not to say that faith saves us (Eph. 2:8-9). We are saved *through* faith. Faith is the means or vehicle that brings salvation. But in itself, faith does not save us. God saves us. Salvation is by grace, using the agent of faith.

- ✓ Faith is not a work of merit — it is a response of dependence to what has already been done for us. Faith says to God, “I can’t...but I believe You can.”
- ✓ It is not abundance of faith that saves us or wavering faith that prevents salvation: “The weakness of your faith will not destroy you. A trembling hand may receive a gracious gift.” [Spurgeon]
- ✓ It is not the amount of our faith that matters, but the person in whom we are trusting, which is what Paul emphasizes when he says, ***faith in Jesus Christ***. Salvation is not in a plan, but in the Person. Salvation is and always has been by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
- The Reformers called this *Sola Fide* — we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. No merit.

3. Who Needs Justification? (v. 22b)

- Notice the next thing that Paul says — this righteousness is ***for all those who believe***. A couple of observations about what Paul means —
 - ✓ He says ***those who believe*** (present tense). Belief is not something that one “did” and belief is not a prayer that one prayed. Belief is an ongoing, present, continual reality in the life of the believer. He is not sinless, and sometimes he has doubts and fears and questions about God and life, but one thing alone is his rock: he knows and believes that if he will ever be pleasing to God it is only because of Christ’s righteousness that is imputed to him. He cannot please God on his own; he is dependent wholly and completely on Christ’s work for him.
 - ✓ And notice that Paul says it is ***for all...who believe***. That is, even though the Jews were and are God’s chosen people, justification is not only for them; it is for all. It is for Jews and it is for Gentiles. And neither Jew nor Gentile can claim justification on the basis of merit; both have sinned and both receive Christ’s righteousness on the basis of grace alone (cf. **1:16b**).
 - ✓ Paul’s emphasis in this passage that justification is only effective for those who believe. But it is also true that the offer of justification is universal (e.g., Paul and Silas to jailer, Acts 16:30-31; Jesus to Nicodemus, **Jn. 3:3, 7, 15-16**). From our perspective, anyone can come to God in faith for justification. His offer of justification is not just “widely available,” it is *universally available*! So one writer says, “God’s righteousness is available only through faith in Christ — but it is available to *anyone* who has faith in Christ.” [Moo, 226.]
 - ✓ But when Paul says it is for all who believe it also means it is *only* for those who believe; if one does not have faith in Christ then he is not justified and Christ’s righteousness will not be applied to him.
 - ✓ And then he says, ***there is no distinction***. For the better part of three chapters, Paul made clear that there was no distinction between the supposed righteousness of men — whether pagans or Jews or anyone else, there is no one who is righteous on his own. There’s no distinction: all are sinners (he’ll say again in v. 23). And the amazing part of God’s grace is that there is also no distinction in God’s plan of salvation: whether pagan, or Jew, or anyone else, all men alike in the whole world must be saved by Christ and can be saved by Christ through God’s provision of justification.

✓ ***There is no distinction*** —all are under sin and all have the same offer of salvation made to them.

- What are the implications of the statement, ***for all those who believe?***

- ✓ All men can believe and all men *must* believe. When he was preaching in Athens, Paul said, “God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent...” (Acts 17:30). And this verse means that not only must all men repent and believe, but all men *can* repent and believe.
- ✓ A second implication of this truth is that God’s righteousness is sufficient to atone for every sin of every man. Listen to what John MacArthur has said about this verse:

“Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ — whether a murderer, prostitute, thief, rapist, homosexual, religious hypocrite, false teacher, pagan, or anything else — will be saved. Just as no one is good enough to be saved, no one is so evil that he cannot be saved....there is no distinction among those who are saved, because there is no distinction among those who are lost [v. 23].” [MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 207-8.]

- ✓ And that means, dear friend, that if you are not a Christian you still have hope. Your sin is piled up against you and declaring your condemnation — even your own conscience tells you that you are a sinner (2:15). But these two verses mean that God has given you exactly everything you need to be freed from your sin. The only question is whether you will believe in Jesus and repent, asking for cleansing and freedom from your sin. If you are not a Christian, will you trust Christ today?

4. Why Justification is Necessary (v. 23)

- Why justification must be by grace: because there is no difference in “sinnerhood” of man — ***ALL*** (Jew/Gentile...) ***have sinned***. This is a simple summary of chs. 1-3. So this refers to the extent of sin — ***all*** have sinned. There are no exceptions. There is a pervasiveness of sin in all men. No man can say he is not a sinner (**1 Jn. 1:10**).
- This phrase also refers to the sinfulness of sin. All ***have sinned*** refers to the specific acts of sin that violate God’s standard. In 5:12ff, Paul will point out that because of Adam, our very nature is completely tainted by sin — we *are* (apart from Christ) sinners. But here his emphasis is that apart from Christ, all men sin and have sinned (**5:12**). And in saying that he infers that God’s judgment of all men is right and just. [Caveat: that does not mean that all men sin in equal ways or in equal quantities; we are not all equal in our violation of God’s standard. But, as one writer says, “The standard is nothing less than perfection, and nothing less can pass. That means that the lack of an inch is as fatal as the lack of a foot.” [SLJ sermon notes] There is no distinction between us; we all have the same need for God to justify us because we are incapable of pleasing Him on our own.
- What is this sin like? ***Sin*** is used in conjunction with many other words in Scripture, which reveals more about what it means to sin —
 - ✓ Sin is a blasphemous insult against God (usurping God’s position by ignoring His commands; Mt. 12:31).

- ✓ Sin is a deceitful lie, promising that which it cannot provide (7:11; Heb. 3:13); in fact, it is slavery (6:6, 16-17).
- ✓ Sin is an illicit, self-gratifying desire/lust for something that cannot satisfy (6:12; 7:5; Js. 1:15).
- ✓ Sin is unrighteousness that refuses its duty to God and men (6:13; 1 Jn. 5:17)
- ✓ Sin is an acceptance of the world's standards above the standards and protection of God (Js. 2:9)
- ✓ Sin is lawlessness that seeks the removal of all restraints (4:7; 1 Jn. 3:4); it is not just to "miss the mark," but it is intentional rebellion against God's commands.

"I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know that the heart of a good man is like, and it is terrible." [Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev]

- And **fall short** explains explicitly how Paul thinks about sin in this context — it is failure to meet a standard; one is deficient or destitute of that standard. And the failure is continual. Everyone constantly fails the essential test of righteousness. As one writer said, "The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of it [sc. God's glory]; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they." [Moule, quoted by Stott, 109.]
- And what all men fall short of is **God's glory**. What does Paul mean by that?
 - ✓ To "glorify God" means to reveal the nature and essence of who God is. So when Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:31 — "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," he means, everything we do should demonstrate the character of God. And so to miss God's glory means that apart from Christ man perpetually and continually fails to act in any way that reveals God.
 - ✓ Let's take it one more step: in Phil. 3:21 Paul says that our bodies will be conformed to the image of Christ. We will be conformed to Christ. And in Rom. 8:28-29, Paul says something similar: the goal of our salvation is our conformity to the image of Christ. So to fall short of God's glory is to say that we aren't conformed to Christ. Every human being fails to do and be what they were created to be — we are failures as image-bearers of God. Our natures reveal something of God, but as one writer says, "the absence of glory involves a declension from the 'image of God' in which human beings were first made." [Moo, 226.] We've declined from God's intent for us. And because of the pervasiveness of our sin and the inability to "un-sin" (what's happened has happened), all men can justly be judged by God as sinners.
- Let's consider some implications of the sinfulness of men:
 - ✓ Because all men are sinners, no one is capable of claiming righteousness before God. No one is inherently righteous (1:32; 2:1-2). And no one has an ability to keep God's Law perfectly because all men have sinned (3:20, 27). In fact, obedience to the Law can't save anyone because it keeps revealing just how sinful men are by their disobedience to it (3:20b). As one writer succinctly said, "Why does Paul say that salvation isn't gained by good works? The implicit answer is: human disobedience." [Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 109.]

- ✓ Because all men are sinners, God is right to judge all men for their sin (3:5). It would be just for Him to give “instant Hell” to everyone the first time anyone sins. We *really don't* want justice.
- ✓ Because all men are sinners, there is only one hope for us — and that hope has been given! Notice the connecting word **for** at the beginning of v. 23. We might translate it “because” — the reason justification must be through faith alone in Christ alone is because of the problem of sin. There is no distinction between any individuals — no one can save himself and everyone is dependent on Christ. And (glory to God!), Christ has been provided! There is a righteousness that has been imputed (justification) to all those who believe in Christ (v. 22)!
- ✓ Because all men are sinners and because everyone will be judged for those sins if they don't trust Christ, we have an urgency to tell them about Christ. That's why world missions is important and why we spend a significant amount of money each year supporting people like Jack and David. But it's also why evangelism is important. We want to create a culture of evangelism and a normalcy to sharing the gospel because it's not just Buddhists in Cambodia who go to Hell if they don't believe. Moral people who call themselves religious and “Christian” in Granbury, TX also go to Hell if they don't believe in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation.
- ✓ We have been taught to believe that all our problems are outside of us and all the solutions are inside of us; but we have an *internal* problem that can only be solved from outside of us. Jesus is that solution, and He has accomplished all that we need!

CONCLUSION: A few weeks ago I came across a hymn that states well the truth of what God has done in justifying us through Christ:

*His robes for mine: O wonderful exchange!
Clothed in my sin, Christ suffered 'neath God's rage.
Draped in His righteousness, I'm justified.
In Christ I live, for in my place He died.*

*His robes for mine: what cause have I for dread?
God's daunting Law Christ mastered in my stead.
Faultless I stand with righteous works not mine,
Saved by my Lord's vicarious death and life.*

*Chorus:
I cling to Christ, and marvel at the cost:
Jesus forsaken, God estranged from God.
Bought by such love, my life is not my own.
My praise-my all-shall be for Christ alone.
[www.churchworksmedia.com/his-robes-for-mine/]*

His robes of righteousness for my rags of sin. This is what justification accomplishes.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25