

“GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED” PT. 3
ROMANS 3:24-26

This is the third week that we’ve looked at this passage that one commentator said “is possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.” [Morris, 173.] Why are we taking so much time and going so slowly through this passage?

Because this may be the single clearest passage on the biblical doctrine of justification — how God declares sinners to be righteous. And as Phil Johnson has rightly noted, the doctrine of justification is unique among all doctrines in Scripture because —

A person can affirm the doctrines of the virgin birth of Christ, have a solid grasp on the incarnation, believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, and yet be one...who—rather than trusting in Christ alone for justification—[is] seeking to establish a righteousness of [his] own by works.

In other words, you can be basically sound on Christology or theology proper and unsound on the gospel. And that error, Paul says, will damn you without remedy.

But the converse is not true. I have never met anyone who truly understood and affirmed justification by faith and the principle of *sola fide* who was unsound on other fundamental doctrines....the principle of justification by faith works only if you affirm the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Stay sound on the principle of *sola fide*, and you will also be basically sound in your understanding of the atonement.

In the same way, all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity—the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the truth of a Trinitarian Godhead, the doctrines of grace, and even the authority of Scripture—are all linked in one way or another so that the better you understand this doctrine of justification by faith, the more sound you will be in all of your theology.

That’s why we’re going slowly and that’s why we are savoring these verses that describe God’s eternal and infinite grace in saving us.

So what does Paul say in these verses? He teaches that:

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 and Where Justification was Accomplished (v. 25a)
7. How Justification Really is Just (vv. 25b-26)

1. What Justification Is (v. 21)

- 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?
 - ✓ It could be the righteousness of God that He demands of all people and that without it God will pour out His infinite and eternal wrath on those who are unrighteous.
 - ✓ 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 (cf. vv. 24-26).
- 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 this imputed righteousness is the same now as it was in the OT in **the Law and the prophets** (vv. 25-26).

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.
- The importance of faith in being justified is seen throughout this passage (vv. 22 [2x], 25, 26).
- The Reformers called this *Sola Fide* — we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. No merit.

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

- Notice Paul says Christ's righteousness 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**).
- Christ's righteousness is also available for any who believe: "God's righteousness is available only through faith in Christ — but it is available to *anyone* who has faith in Christ." [Moo, 226.]
- But Paul 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***: all are sinners (he'll say again in v. 23). And, amazingly, God's grace means 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.
- So who needs justification? All people everywhere. There's no distinction: all are under sin and all have the same offer of salvation made to them.

4. Why Justification is Necessary (v. 23)

- Why justification must be by grace: because there is no difference in the sinfulness of men — ***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**).
- And the essence of that sin is that they have ***fallen short of God's glory***. They are deficient and have failed to meet the standard given by God — and the standard is His glory. They were created to live for Him and instead they lived for themselves. Instead of honoring God they attempted to honor themselves; like Satan in his rebellion, they attempted to usurp the throne of God and they (we!) were all shown to be infinitely deficient. We sinned. We could not meet the standard of God's infinite glory and perfection. And as rebels we earned and deserved God's wrath (1:18; 2:2, 5; 3:19; 6:23).
- So why is justification from God through Christ necessary? Because we must be righteous to be with God and we can never be righteous on our own. So how does God accomplish our justification?

5. Who Accomplished Justification? (v. 24)

- Verse 24 begins with the phrase, ***being justified***. And one question is, "who is being justified?" And the answer is that ***being justified*** is explaining the word ***all*** in v. 23, which is building on the phrase ***there is no distinction*** in v. 22. In other words those who are justified by God are those who believe in Christ (v. 22), not trusting themselves to be able to be righteous (just) before God.
- Now when we talk about justification, a very common explanation of it is that it means, "Just as if I never sinned." The problem with simplifications is that they sometimes over-simplify and lose the power and impact of the word, and that's what that definition does.
 - ✓ Justification does cancel and remove our legal debt of sin. The sin is gone; it was imputed to Christ and when He satisfactorily absorbed God's wrath, the sin debt was paid and the sin was removed.
 - ✓ But it does more than that; it also imputes (credits, bestows) the merit and standing of Christ to us. God looks at us not as sinners, but as if we had done all that Christ had done (4:5, 22-25; 5:17; Phil. 3:9; 1 Cor. 1:30).

- ✓ This is “no ‘legal fiction,’ but a legal *reality* of the utmost significance, ‘to be justified’ means to be acquitted by God from all ‘charges’ that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins.” [Moo, 227.] God isn’t playing theological games, saying, “I’ll just pretend that they are righteous even though they are not.” No! As MacArthur says, “God is not an illusionist who makes things appear to be as they are not. When the Lord saves a believer, He recreates him into a real, not imagined, child of God.” [MacArthur, 208.]
- ✓ Now the completion of our justification will be when we get to glory when the reality of sin is finally and fully removed (Rom. 8:29-30). But because of Christ, God sees that already as a completed act. Through Christ, God has made us fully acceptable to God for fellowship with Him.
- ✓ And notice that justification is an act (not a process, e.g., Catholicism) — there are no degrees of justification; when someone is justified he is completely and irrevocably justified. If you are justified and I am justified we have the same measure of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us. God does not view you as more righteous than me, even if you have been a believer for 30 more years.
- ✓ Many years ago I played the fool and received a speeding ticket that necessitated a court appearance. When the judge read the charge and asked me how I would plead, the only thing I could say was, “guilty.” He passed down a verdict in keeping with my guilty charge and I suppose that my name is still on the books in that county as “Guilty.” Though I paid my debt and fulfilled my service, I was still guilty. That didn’t change. But when God justifies a sinner, the sin and guilt (and by that I mean culpability, and not just a feeling) is *gone*. And it is gone completely and permanently. We are declared righteous.
- ✓ And through justification, sin is removed and the life is also *cleansed* and *redeemed* so that which was previously used to convict us is now used to glorify God (Tt. 2:14; 1 Pt. 1:14-19). Because of justification it is now possible to live for God and be free from sin’s bondage (6:5-7, 20-22).
- ✓ Note: justification is the key point of difference that resulted in the Reformation. Both Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church believe that some form of righteousness comes from Christ through faith. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that instead of righteousness being imputed to believers, that righteousness is *infused* through baptism. That is, that righteousness is poured into the believer and that person then must cooperate with and ascent to that grace “until actual righteousness inheres within the believer.” [Council of Trent] Only after that righteousness is inherent in the person will God declare the person to be just. [Sproul, youtu.be/P78g87h9J5M].

“Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ. It is granted us through Baptism....No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, *we can merit for ourselves and others all the graces needed to attain eternal life*, as well as necessary temporal goods.” [Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶ 2020, 2027; my emphasis.]

- ✓ But this passage makes clear that it is God and God alone who accomplishes our justification.

- And here is another amazing reality of justification: it is free to us! The justification comes as a **free gift** from grace, and through Christ's payment *alone*.
 - ✓ So Paul says it is a gift — it's not something that is received by merit or achievement. It's a gift.
 - ✓ And to state the obvious, if we receive a gift, someone must be the giver of the gift. And the one who gives is God — Paul says **by His grace**. It's from Him — from God, whose glory we failed to meet. We shook our fists in rebellion against Him and He gave us this magnificent gift. It's without payment — *gratis*. And this justification is from God and *only* from God.
 - ✓ And to say that it is **by His grace** not only means the gift is unmerited, but it is also lavish, for His grace is infinite. E.g., **Rom. 7:24-25** and 2 Cor. 9:15 as a summary of 9:8-14. That's a lavish gift.

- How could God pay or provide for this righteousness? (Note that He could not simply say, "I'll ignore the sin and pretend it didn't happen" — He could not be righteous and do that, which Paul said in **3:5-6**).
 - ✓ He justifies us **through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**. That is, justification is free, but it's also costly. We receive the gift of justification, but that doesn't mean there was no cost to the gift. We did not pay for our justification (we could *never* pay for our justification), but God did pay for it.
 - ✓ And God paid for it through Christ's redemption. The word **redemption** is an interesting one.
 - Redemption was used in the slave market — someone who was enslaved to a master was bought (redeemed) and by the payment of the redemption price, he was freed from slavery.
 - And that is exactly what happens in the life of the believer. We are enslaved to sin and we cannot purchase or work our way out of debt. So another comes and pays the price for us. The fact that this justification is a **gift** means that someone (God) bought the gift. And God bought it through Christ's blood on the cross (note the reference to **blood** in v. 25).
 - And this was a singularly unique redemption — notice only **Christ Jesus** could purchase it. **Christ Jesus** is a favorite term of Paul, referring to Christ's deity (**Christ** = His Messianic title) and humanity (**Jesus** = His human name); it took the God-Man to stand in our place and pay our debt. If He was not God He could not pay the debt and if He was not man He could not stand in our place.
 - To whom was this debt paid? It certainly wasn't paid to Satan. No, God received and was satisfied with the payment. So notice what is going on in this text:
 - ... We have an infinite debt of sin that we cannot pay.
 - ... God originates the process of redemption.
 - ... God, in Christ, pays the debt of redemption.
 - ... God receives the payment of redemption from and through Christ.
 - ... God imputes the payment of redemption to our account, justifying and liberating us.
 - ... We are freed eternally; there is no further outstanding debt to be paid. It's finished.
 - ... Summary: We owe God something we cannot pay and He does everything to buy us out of our slavery and debt of sin.

- ✓ This is grace! The gift of God's justification of sinners comes by grace — unmerited provision for a new relationship and fellowship with the eternal Godhead (Rom. 5:21; 1 Cor. 15:10). We are dependent on the arrival of God's gift for any hope that we can be made righteous. We cannot justify ourselves. Only God can justify us. And He did, through Christ.

6. When and Where Justification was Accomplished (v. 25a)

- Paul further defines the redemption of Christ and the work of Christ by saying that ***God displayed [Him] publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.***
- The word Paul uses for ***displayed publicly*** can also be translated “purpose,” or “plan” or “design.” In fact, the only other two places it is used in the NT, that's the way it is used (Rom. 1:13; Eph. 1:9). And I think that's what Paul is saying here: more than God making a public declaration of Christ's work, Paul is emphasizing that this was God's eternal plan for man. God is the origin of our redemption and He has always planned and intended our redemption. Before we were born, He intended our salvation and adoption into His family. For reasons that are incomprehensible to us, He set His love on us when we were rebellious to Him (Rom. 5:8) and even before we were born (Eph. 1:4).
- And what God purposed for us was to be justified through the propitiating work of Christ's blood.
 - ✓ The word ***propitiation*** has its roots in an OT practice on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:5-10, 15-19).
 - The priest is cleansed through the sacrifice of the bull for his sins and then he offers the goat for the sins of the people. Blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat (which contained the tablets of the Law that Moses received from God). So as God looked down at the Ark and saw the Law, which the people violated, He saw the blood that covered the Law.
 - Then Moses makes application of this principle in Lev. 16:30 — “you will be clean from all your sins before the Lord” (v. 30)...yet it had to be done “once every year” (v. 34). They were clean, but not completely — it was a temporary cleansing (Paul calls it a passing over of sin, v. 25b).
 - So propitiation says that God accepted the sacrifice and was satisfied with it so that He would not punish the sinner and through that satisfaction can make sinners clean.
 - We see the idea of the propitiating sacrifice expanded to include the work of the Messiah and suffering Servant in **Is. 53:10**.
 - And when Christ died on the cross, and when Christ shed ***His blood*** on the cross, God was finally and fully satisfied. This was the final act of propitiation. As the writer of Hebrews says, the blood of bulls and goats could not fully atone for the sins of the people; they could only forestall God's wrath. But Christ fully satisfied God's wrath with His death (Heb. 10:10, 14).
 - And think for just a moment about Christ's blood. Blood is the symbol of life. And for blood to be poured out means that life is poured out. When Hebrews teaches that there is no forgiveness without blood (9:22) he means that there is no forgiveness without death. And for a sacrifice to be adequate, it had to be equivalent, so an animal sacrifice is inadequate to atone

for a human sin; so only Christ can atone for the sin of human beings. And when His blood is poured out and His life is given, then (and only then) is God satisfied. Listen to Jerry Bridges:

“The blood of Christ’ in connection with our salvation, is a favorite expression of New Testament writers, occurring about thirty times. It is the blood of Christ that cleanses our consciences from defilement of sin (Hebrews 9:14); it is the blood of Christ that purities us from all sin (1 John 1:7); it is by the blood of Christ that we have confidence to enter into the Most Holy Place — the very presence of an infinitely holy God (Hebrews 10:10). It is the blood of Christ...that turns the holy and just wrath of God away from us. Therefore when we realize we are smarting under the conviction of sin, when we realize we have failed God one more time, perhaps even in the same sin, we must resort to the cleansing blood of Jesus. As a well-known gospel hymn from the nineteenth century expressed it,

What can wash away my sin?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” [*Disciplines of Grace*, p. 57.]

- ✓ So the word propitiation reveals the satisfaction of God with those who have received Christ’s righteousness through Christ’s blood.
- ✓ The word propitiation also reinforces the idea that God *is* wrathful and *must* pour out His wrath on sin (Rom. 1:18; 2:4-5, 8; 3:5; 5:9; 9:22; Rev. 19:15).
- ✓ And the word propitiation places all the emphasis of our salvation on God:
 - God is the One who initiates the plan for a propitiatory sacrifice.
 - God, in Christ, is the One who accomplishes propitiation.
 - Christ is the propitiation (mercy seat) on which the blood is sprinkled.
 - And Christ is the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat. (In a similar way in which He is both the sacrifice made as a Lamb and the One who makes the sacrifice as the Priest.)
 - God is the One who is propitiated by Christ (God Himself).
 - The work of propitiation is all by God and through God and for God (so that His wrath is satisfied) — with the result that we are justified.
- When was justification accomplished? It was accomplished when Christ died on the cross, though it was part of God’s eternal purpose and plan for us. And where was it accomplished? It was accomplished in the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
- And notice again, that **faith** is the manner in which propitiation is appropriated (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6). The only way to be justified is not by what you do but by the One whom you believe and trust. Oh friends, we all were in the most terrible predicament imaginable: we were sinners, enslaved to our sin, and incapable of doing anything righteous. And in His astounding grace, God made a plan to declare (and ultimately make) us righteous that came through the work of God the Son as the redemption and propitiation of our sins.

- ✓ All of us have sinned; all of us have intentionally violated God's standard and resisted His glory and authority. All of us deserve His wrath.
- ✓ Yet in His grace He has made a way of escape from that wrath and it is in the person of Christ. If you have not repented of your sin and asked for God to forgive you and transform (or redeem) you from your sin, you are still under God's wrath. Oh friend, if that's you, I urge and compel you to seek His forgiveness; stop assuming you will be able to withstand His wrath and trust that Christ was able to withstand His wrath for you and that Christ is able to change you into one who lives by faith for Him. Will you stop trusting yourself and begin trusting Him today?

CONCLUSION:

You may recognize the name of William Cowper; he was a close friend of John Newton, with whom he collaborated on a hymnal, and wrote many hymns and poems including, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," and "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood," and "O for a Closer Walk with God." When Cowper was 28 he had a mental breakdown and attempted suicide three different times. Four years later, in 1763, was committed to an insane asylum, convinced that he was damned and unredeemable. Yet in the asylum Dr. Nathaniel Cotton cared for him. Dr. Cotton was a lover of God and a believer in the gospel and he loved Cowper and ministered to Cowper with the Scriptures, including, finally, Romans 3:25. On hearing those words, Cowper later wrote:

Immediately I received the strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fulness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed, and received the gospel.

He was released from the asylum in 1765 and went on to live a productive life of ministry for 35 more years. This is the power of this gospel and the truth of justification. It sets men free and gives hope. Yes, all men are condemned. But the greater truth is that in our hopelessness, God planned and accomplished the declaration of our righteousness through the work of Jesus Christ.

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25