

# The Biblical Doctrine of Justification

## How Can I Be Right With God?

Covenant Life College

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### Session 2, Part 1

#### The Ground of Justification

19) Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

20) For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

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, 25) 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. 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**. [emphasis added]

#### I. Our need for justification—the problem of sin and the purpose of the law (3.19-23)

19) Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

Paul is concluding his stinging indictment of the human race, summing up his argument begun in Chapter 1, that all people, Jews as well as Gentiles are guilty before a holy God. The picture this verse projects is that of a defendant in a courtroom unable to say anything in his defense because of the mountain of evidence amassed against him.

20) For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The phrase *works of the law* is an important one which now makes its first appearance in Romans. Paul clearly states that works of the law cannot justify. There seems to be some sort of self-salvation in view. Jesus addressed this in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18). So, by the works of the law no flesh will be justified before God. This is because that is not the purpose of the law. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. As J.B. Phillips has it in his paraphrase translation, "... the law is the straightedge that shows us how crooked we are." One of the chief functions of the law is to show us our sinfulness. The law can do this because it expresses the holy character of God.

The stage is now set for one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.

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

The phrase *the righteousness of God* appears again. It was first used in Chapter 1.17. Understanding this phrase is key to getting the doctrine of justification right. Is it a genitive of possession or a genitive of origin? Ryken says both!<sup>1</sup>

“The righteousness of (or from) God is a combination of his righteous character, his saving initiative and his gift of a righteous standing before him. It is his just justification of the unjust, his righteous way of ‘righteousing’ the unrighteous.”<sup>2</sup>

This righteousness has been manifested, that is, made known. This manifestation has occurred apart from the law. But it is not in opposition to the law. The Law and Prophets actually bear witness to it, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

*22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction...*

Two more things are told us about this righteousness of God. It comes through faith in Jesus and it comes to all who believe.

*23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ...*  
There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile—all have sinned, all fall short of God’s glory.

## **II. The source of justification—God’s grace (3.24a)**

*24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

John R. W. Stott comments that the source of justification is the free grace of God. And that the ground of justification is the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Here Paul is connecting the righteousness of God with justification. Justification is a legal or forensic term. The verb *to justify* and related terms occur about 30 times in this letter. It means “to declare righteous.” (See the accompanying sheet “Statements.”)

## **III. The ground of justification—the work of Jesus Christ**

1. Redemption in Christ Jesus (3.24b)
2. Propitiation by His blood; the wrath of God satisfied (3.25)
3. Showing or demonstrating His righteousness (3.25-26)

*24b) through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*

The word “redemption” is an image borrowed from the ancient slave market. It involved paying the necessary ransom to gain the release of the prisoner or slave. Only the cross work of Jesus Christ could pay the ransom for sinners (Mark 10.45).

*25) whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.*

“Propitiation” is a term of great importance and one that has generated much controversy. The verb “to propitiate” means to appease or render favorable. It signifies that God has wrath that needs to be satisfied, pacified, propitiated. **So the idea of propitiation is that of a wrath removing sacrifice.** Some believe this idea of a wrathful God to be unworthy of His character. Of course, the Old Testament sacrificial system is based on this concept. The equivalent Hebrew word for propitiation is used in the Old Testament of the ‘mercy seat’ which covered the ark of the covenant and had blood sprinkled on it on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16.15).

God’s holy wrath is directed toward sin and evil. There is nothing contradictory about God and wrath. Indeed, it would be a flaw in God’s character if He were indifferent to sin and

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation*, p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, p. 109.

evil. His holy and righteous character requires His steady, unremitting, fierce antagonism and opposition toward sin.

*25b-26) This was to show (demonstrate) God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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.*

"... *the passing over sins formerly committed.*" Paul used an unusual word here, one that means "to overlook, to disregard, to intentionally overlook." In this context it signifies the difference between *forgiveness* and *not punishing*.

Note the contrast between "former sins" and "the present time." God postponed the judgment of sins committed before the cross so that He could punish them in the death of His Son. In this way, He could be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Cf. Acts 17.30; Hebrews 9.15)