

Covenant Life College
Paul's Letter to the Romans
Session 4 – Robin Boisvert

The Biblical Doctrine of Justification – How Can I Be Right With God?

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 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 words 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 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 of a genitive of origin? Ryken says both!¹

“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.”²

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 with justification. Justification is a legal or forensic term. The verb *to justify* and related terms occur about 30 times

¹ Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation*, 195.

² John R.W. Stott, *Romans*, p. 109.

in this letter. It means to “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

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 of 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 important 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 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).

IV. Faith is the means through which we are justified (3.27-31)

In this next section (which actually extends into the next chapter), Paul expands upon the means by which this righteous standing with God comes to us – faith (Cf. Romans 3:22 “through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...”).

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 law. 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. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. 31) Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Paul’s style again reflects the method of diatribe. An (imaginary?) Jewish questioner is answered, Paul making his points sharply.

.27 Boasting is excluded. Boasting is common to us all. “Boasting is the language of our fallen self-centeredness.”³ I so very much need to feel good about myself that I must tell you of my accomplishments. Even self-pity which seems the opposite of boasting has been aptly described as ‘unapplauded pride.’ But Paul probably has in mind Jewish pride, indicated by his subsequent reference to the ‘law.’ The boasting Paul has in mind has to do with pride in accomplishment – the keeping of the law. It is excluded by the law (principle) of faith. **That justification is by faith alone should exclude boasting and humble us.**

.28 “...justified by faith apart from the works of the law” amounts to saying: “justified by faith alone.”

.29-30 From Genesis God’s plan has included Jews and Gentiles (Gen 12.3), though his initial covenant was with the Jews only. The inclusion of the Gentiles is an important theme in this section. But it is not the main theme – faith is.⁴ **That justification is by faith should have the effect of breaking down divisions and seeing all who have this faith as one.**

.31 Though at times Paul seems to be opposed to the law, we will see that this is not the case (cf. Romans 7). He answers the opponent who accuses him of overthrowing the law by denying it and then countering that faith establishes the law. It will be seen that the law has a role to play, but not with regard to justification before God. It is through faith we are justified, not through keeping the law. The law being upheld here probably means that justified believers walk according to the Spirit and fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (cf. Romans 8.4). **That justification is by faith alone should warn us against antinomianism.**

³ J.R.W. Stott, *Romans*, IVP, p. 119.

⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, p. 244.