

Romans 3:21-30
Justification – Part 1: Justification by Faith Alone

Introduction

1. In 1:16-17 Paul made the following declaration: **“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”**
 - a. The Gospel—and the Gospel alone—provides salvation to both Jew and Gentile alike
 - b. The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God (both the righteousness God possesses as well as the righteousness imputed to believers)
 - c. The Gospel is revealed “from faith to faith” meaning that it must both be accepted by faith and lived out in faith (e.g. the righteous must live by faith)
2. He then discussed the topic of judgment and declares that all of mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, are under sin and face the wrath of God (1:18-3:20)
3. He now moves on to the topic of justification and will cover that from 3:21-5:21
 - a. In 3:21-31 he will discuss justification by faith alone
 - b. In 4:1-25 he will demonstrate that faith has always been the means to justification
 - c. In 5:1-21 he will reveal the blessings of justification

A. Justification by faith alone reveals God’s righteousness (3:21-26)

1. Paul stated in 3:20 that works of the Law cannot justify anyone in God’s sight
 - a. In simple terms, to be justified means to be declared right or righteous by God’s standards
 - b. This is something the Law could not do, and if the Law could not do it then no law can do it
 - c. The best the Law could do was give a knowledge of sin—in Romans 7:7 Paul says that had it not been for the Law he would not have known what sin way
2. Here in 3:21 Paul now declares that **“but now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested,”**
 - a. So, we have a contrast (“**but now**”)—should be taken in a temporal sense, a new phase in God’s plan of salvation
 - b. God’s righteousness has now been revealed not through the Law but through another means—the faithfulness of Jesus Christ:
 - 1) **“has been manifest”** (perfect passive): been revealed, made known
 - 2) The phrase **“righteousness of God”** here is not a reference to the righteousness imputed to believers, but rather God’s righteous actions (to be defines later)
 - 3) It was **“witnessed by the Law and the Prophets”**
 - 4) It is manifest through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (22):
 - a) There is debate over how to render this verse because the phrase
 - All but the NET translated it as **“through faith in Jesus Christ”**
 - The NET translates it as **“through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ”**
 - The controversy is because the word faith is followed by a genitive (“of”) rather than a dative (“in”)—so literally it reads “faith of Jesus Christ”

- b) Many modern NT scholars argue that in the NT when *pistis* is followed by a personal genitive, the genitive is most often, though not always, a subjective genitive which makes Jesus the subject of the faith (e.g. “the faith of Jesus” refers to the faith or faithfulness that Christ possesses because he is the subject expressing the faith). We have a perfect example of this in Rom 3:3 where we have almost the exact Greek phrase—*pistis* followed by the genitive for God: “faithfulness of God”
- c) Others argue that the genitive here should be considered objective which means that Jesus here is the object of the faith much like the phrase “fear of heights” or “love of money”—so, they believe “faith of Jesus Christ” is better rendered as “faith in Jesus Christ” making Jesus the object of our faith
- d) In my estimation, “**faithfulness of Jesus Christ**” fits the context better than “**faith in Jesus Christ**”:
- It’s the most natural reading grammatically
 - Paul is referring to the righteous actions of God in justifying sinners being revealed by something...is that something our faith in Jesus Christ or is that something the faithfulness of Jesus Christ?
 - The phrase immediately following this one, “**to all those who believe**”, would seem to be redundant if this phrase is rendered “faith in Jesus...” because that already implies belief;
 - God’s righteousness is revealed by Christ’s faithfulness to those who believe in Jesus
 - See note on v. 26 below as well
3. So, what is this righteous activity or action by God that is revealed in the Gospel? It’s the justification of individuals as a gift of God’s grace! (23-26)
- a. Paul repeats that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (23)—e.g. we are all condemned because of sin
- b. But, we are “**justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**” (24):
- 1) Again, to be justified means to be declared right or righteous according to God’s standards
 - 2) Paul tells us something about this justification:
 - a) It is without cost to us: Most English translations render this verse as “**justified freely**” rather than “as a gift” because Paul uses an adverb which means without cost to modify the verb justified
 - b) It is an act of God’s grace: “**by His grace**”—grace is unmerited or undeserved favor
 - c) It is available only “**through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus**”—the verb form of the word for redemption here refers to paying a ransom or paying a price to let someone go free
- c. This was possible because Jesus was the atoning sacrifice God made on our behalf (25-27): “**whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith**”
- 1) Paul writes that God “**displayed publicly**” (lit. put forward, offered) Jesus as a “**propitiation**” (25):
 - 2) We’ll talk about this word propitiation in a minute, but first Paul uses three prepositional phrases to expand on the significance of Christ as our propitiation:
 - a) “**in his blood**”:

- This indicates specifically that it is Christ’s death that establishes Himself as a propitiation
 - The shed blood of Jesus is the means by which God’s justice and wrath are satisfied (see also Romans 5:9; Eph 1:7; 2:13)
- b) **“by faith”**:
- The NIV and CSB read “by faith in his blood” but “in his blood” is better understood to modify “propitiation” rather than “faith”
 - Faith is the means by which the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are attributed to us
 - Paul already mentioned this in 3:22 above
- c) **“to demonstrate His [God’s] righteousness”** (lit. “into or toward a sign of His righteousness”):
- This phrase explains the purpose or reason why God sacrificed His own son as a propitiation for us
 - In the past, **“because of the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed”**—this simply means that God did not execute completely His wrath and judgment upon sinners prior to Christ
 - However, God’s justice needed to be satisfied so **“at the present time”** God sacrificed Jesus to finally satisfy that justice: **“so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”** (lit. **“so he would be just and the one who justifies from the faith (or faithfulness) of Jesus”** (26) –see note on v. 22 above and NET translation
- 3) There is a lot of debate over this word **“propitiation”** that Paul uses here (Greek: hilasterion)
- a) One argument is that the word means to appease God and turn his wrath away. In this use, Jesus—specifically His death—is seen as the appeasement, the thing which satisfies God’s wrath (this view is borrowed mostly from its classical use in Roman and Greek mythology, but has some merit here as Paul just finished discussing in great detail God’s wrath in chapter 1)
 - b) Another argument is that this word is simply a reference to the Mercy Seat of the OT: In other words, Christ is the Mercy Seat (e.g. the place where forgiveness is given). The mercy seat was the covering of the Ark of the Covenant; it’s where God appeared and where once per year the high priest would pour out the blood of the sacrificial lamb to make atonement for sin. The two strongest arguments in favor of this view is that the form of the word used here is only used one other time in the NT where it certainly refers to the Mercy Seat (Hebrews 9:5). Also, 21 of the 27 times it’s used in the LXX it refers to the mercy seat.
 - c) A third view is that this word refers to the means of forgiveness. A related word, hilasmos, is used by John in 1 John 2:2 & 4:10 to refer to Christ Himself as the atoning sacrifice
 - d) I prefer the third view because it seems most agreeable to the immediate context and lines up better with 1 John 2:2 and 4:10
 - e) The NIV seems to capture the meaning best: **“as a sacrifice of atonement”**

B. Justification by faith alone eliminates boasting (3:27-30)

1. Paul makes a very simple statement here--Justification by faith leaves no room for boasting (27): **“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.”**
 - a. Boasting refers to having an unusual amount of confidence in one’s own abilities or achievements
 - b. In this context, Paul is referring specifically to Jews who boasted in their keeping of the Law thinking that such works justified them before God
 - c. He mentions two laws--the Law of Works and the Law of Faith:
 - 1) The Law of Works refers to trying to earn justification by what one does, through religious works—again, he has the Jew in mind first and foremost here
 - 2) The Law of Faith refers to placing one’s trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ for justification
 - 3) These two laws are mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed to one another and only one has the ability to justify the sinner (28): **“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”**

2. Paul poses a rhetorical question to make his case (29-30): **“Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also?”**
 - a. This is a legitimate question because if works of the Law could justify, then why did God only give the Law to the Jews?
 - b. The answer is clearly that **“Yes, [God is the God] of Gentiles”** as well
 - c. There are two implications here:
 - 1) The first is that there must be not another way, but a different way, to be justified
 - 2) Since God is One (the same for both Jew and Gentile), then justification must be the same for both and that way is by faith (30): **“since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.”**

Conclusion
