

By Faith Alone
Romans 3:21-26
Part 1

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. 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.

Verses 21-22: Two Verses with much Power

“But Now”

After clearly demonstrating that no human flesh is justified by the Law, Paul begins this second segment (3:20-5:21) of his epistle with these two small, but extremely meaningful words. The phrase summons our minds to the preceding verses which, as we have already seen, robustly argue that the knowledge of sin comes through the Law. With this truth firmly established, Paul craftily draws our attention from the old era of sin's prominence to the new era of salvation characterized by faith in Christ.¹ Douglas Moo explains more fully,

This contrast between two eras in salvation history is one of Paul's most basic theological conceptions, providing the framework for many of his key ideas. Rom. 1:18-3:20 has sketched the spiritual state of those who belong to the old era: justly condemned, helpless in the power of sin, powerless to escape God's wrath. 'But now' God has intervened to inaugurate a new era, and all who respond in faith – not only after the cross, but, as Rom. 4 will show, before it also – will be transferred into it from the old era.²

“The Righteousness of God”

Just as the manifestation of the “the wrath of God” dominated verses 1:18-3:20, the manifestation or revelation of “the righteousness of God” dominates verses 3:21-5:21 (especially 3:21-26). As we saw in verse 1:17, Paul uses the righteousness of God in three basic ways. A brief expression of each will prove helpful.

1. An Attribute of God – “God's justice as it is distributed consistently with his gracious character to the world over which he rules and governs”, including the

¹ Please see Romans 6:22; 7:6; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 2:13; and Col. 1:22 for other instances where Paul uses the same phrase in like manner.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (NICNT), ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 221.

way in which he deals with sin through Jesus Christ. Thus, his righteousness is vindicated in the gospel.

2. Covenant Faithfulness – “In the Old Testament, God’s righteousness is often referred to his covenant faithfulness. God made a covenant with his people which he maintained through his own divine faithfulness”, in both the Old and New Testaments (In the old, they looked forward to the promised Messiah, while in the new, we look back to the Messiah who has come). “Therefore, in the gospel, God’s righteousness is demonstrated as He faithfully fulfills the promise that he has made to His people in all ages.”³

3. A Status Given by God – “We are made righteous by the righteousness of God. Therefore, we are declared righteous and given the status of righteous by the grace of God as he imputes or credits the righteousness of Christ to us through faith.”⁴ “The righteousness of which God is the author comes from him, is given by him, and consequently is acceptable in his sight.”⁵

“Apart from the Law”

By examining the surrounding context in which Paul uses the phrase “apart from the Law” along with the above usages of the righteousness of God, we can fairly easily surmise that the righteousness about which Paul speaks is declared strictly independent of our works of the Law. It is alien to us as “it is a righteousness of God, provided by God, and received by faith.”⁶ In this assertion, Paul focuses on the manner in which the righteousness of God is manifested, and in so doing, exposes any inherent sense of legalism that the separation of the law of God from the promise of God and its fulfillment may result. The righteousness of God, as we shall see in chapter 4, is, and has always been, apart from the Law.

“Faith in Jesus Christ for all who Believe”

“Paul is telling us that this righteousness about which he is speaking is bestowed, is received by faith, by personal trust in God and in His promise and especially in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God...through faith alone, through belief and trust...And notice especially that Paul goes out of his way to identify the object of faith as Jesus Christ. There are a lot of people today who think that they are saved by their faith...Your faith is not a work. Christ commends you to God; faith is your way of laying hold of Him. And so the object of faith is not faith...The object of faith is Jesus Christ.”⁷

³ Ligon Duncan, Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, sermon on Romans 3:21-26 entitled, “The Righteousness which comes by Faith.”

⁴ For the original context of the above three quotes with reference to the Righteousness of God see the previous handout on, and discussion of, Romans 1:17, entitled “The Righteousness of God.”

⁵ Hodge, *Romans*, 88.

⁶ Duncan, “The Righteousness which comes by Faith.”

⁷ Ibid. Here we have a final appeal to Duncan for a good articulation of what Paul means by “faith in Christ.”

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Part 2

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. 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.

Verses 22b-24: Sinners justified by grace.

“There is No Distinction”

The key to understanding this phrase is its context. It sits right in the middle of two categorical statements, which serve in a sense as a microcosm of the first five chapters of the epistle in reverse order. The first phrase, “righteousness of God for faith for all who believe,” refers to the glorious truth of salvation by grace received through faith. And the second phrase, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” refers to the universal sinfulness of mankind. Everyone, as Paul has already argued, 1:18-3:20, is guilty because all have fallen short of God’s holy standard, the Law. Therefore, there is no distinction between Jew or Greek nor righteous or unrighteous. All have sinned and all who believe are justified and receive the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Justified freely by his grace

What does Paul mean by justified? He uses the word for the first time in this epistle “to depict his distinctive understanding of Christian salvation.”⁸ This distinctive understanding of salvation is based upon the rendering of the verb “to justify” in a legal manner that means “to declare righteous.” Here, Paul refers to “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.”⁹ Thus, we are justified as a result of God’s pardon for all our sins.¹⁰

Paul emphasizes two distinct aspects of this justification. First, we are justified “freely.” The indication here is that God takes the initiative to justify us by his grace. In other words, our justification is not warranted by us, but rather a result of God’s free choice to declare us righteous. He extended salvation to us by his pleasure. Second, our free justification is a result of God’s divine grace. It is a gift of God’s absolute and

⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 227.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰ Justification also involves a crediting of the righteousness of Christ to believers. We will return to this “imputation” of Christ’s righteousness later in our study, particularly in chapters 4 and 5.

underserved favor. We do not deserve to be justified; God simply gives it us to be received by faith. “Grace is God loving, God stooping, God coming to the rescue, God giving himself generously in and through Jesus Christ.”¹¹

¹¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 112.

Abraham Justified by Faith Romans 4

Paul has successfully explained and defended God's righteousness as it is displayed in justification by faith. In so doing, he asserted that the Old Testament prophets and law does indeed testify to this righteousness which is by faith (Rom. 3:21). Thus, in chapter four he illustrates this fact in a discussion about the patriarch Abraham. Abraham, he argues, was not justified by works; he was not justified by circumcision; he was not justified by the Law. He was, however, justified by faith; the promise was realized through faith.

*Not Works (Romans 4:1-8)*¹²

The crux of this first section is found in verses 4 and 5. Paul makes the argument that Abraham was not justified (declared righteous by God) as a result of his works, but rather because of faith. How does Paul prove this point? He does so by applying to distinct methods – (1) Old Testament quotation, (2) practical example – which build on one another.

If we look at verses 3, we see to quotations of a familiar Old Testament passage, Genesis 15:6. Paul's readers, especially those of Jewish descent, would certainly know the surrounding contexts of each of these quotes. The Genesis quote is taken from the story which tells of God's covenant that he made with Abraham. The significance is quite simple: Abraham believed (completely trusted) God and God counted him righteous. To further explain, Abraham inherited the covenant promises which God made with him (Genesis 12:1-3) because of his belief in God's ability to accomplish that which God had promised.

Now, this possibly leaves us with the idea that our faith is perhaps a new work of the law. In other words, now that justification is by faith not the works of the law as given in the Old Testament, is it that faith is now the work by which we are saved? Is the application of faith the new work by which we are justified? Paul anticipates this question because it was a central concern for the Jewish Christians to whom he wrote. They commonly interpreted Genesis 15:6 through the lens of Genesis 22:1-19 (Abraham's obedient sacrifice of Isaac). This interpretation led to the view that Abraham's faith was his obedience to God and thus, became his work for which God owed him a reward.¹³

Paul, therefore, practically explains that faith cannot be a work if justification (being declared righteous) is a gracious gift of God. Paul's explanation is simple. If a man works, then that which is given to him is due to him as compensation for his work. It cannot be a gift because it is earned. Hence, his wages are counted as his due reward. So, faith as a work receives a due reward. If this is the case, then all of that which Paul has previously written (verses 1:18-3:31, especially 3:20-26) is canceled out and rendered null and void. But that is not the case. Abraham's faith in God's promise is the vehicle that received the righteousness which God gave to him on account of the future work of

¹² I adapted John Stott's breakdown of Romans 4 for our study. See John Stott, *The Message of the Romans* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press (IVP), 1994), 124-137.

¹³ Moo, *Romans*, 262.

Christ, the fulfillment of the promise (Galatians 3:16). Abraham received a righteousness from God through faith.

Not Circumcision (Romans 4:9-12)

Paul returns to his theme of unification in verse 9 by asking whether or not the blessing (justification) is for the circumcised (Jewish believers) and/or the uncircumcised (Gentile believers). This question is important as it gets back to the heart of the issue of justification by faith for Jews and Gentiles. Was Abraham justified before or after his circumcision? If it was before, then Abraham was “technically” still a Gentile when he was justified. Paul answers his own question with chronology and an explanation of circumcision.

Because the covenant sign of circumcision was not introduced until after Ishmael’s birth (Genesis 17:1-14), circumcision is a sign and a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had through faith in the promise while he was yet still uncircumcised. Paul continues to argue that God’s purpose was to make Abraham the father of all those who believe before he was circumcised so that Abraham could be the father of both Jews and Gentiles who believe in the Lord for their salvation. Therefore, Abraham was not justified by his circumcision.

A contemporary application of this is the New Testament covenant sign of baptism. We believe that baptism is “a sacrament, wherein the washing with water, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s.”¹⁴ Baptism is not regenerative; it does not justify those who receive it. Like its Old Testament counterpart circumcision, it is a sign and a seal of the covenant of grace originally established with Abraham, the father of all who believe. Justification is of faith, not baptism.

Not Law but By Faith [Promise] (Romans 4:13-22)

The progression of Paul’s argument continues as he specifically focuses on the law with regard to justification. Abraham did not become the heir of the world through the law but through the righteousness which is by faith. If the opposite were true (Abraham became heir through the law), then faith and the promise are rendered void. Why? The knowledge of sin and God’s wrath are revealed through the law (Romans 3:20; 4:15). Paul’s explanation of this is much clearer in Galatians 3:15-19a.

With the Galatians, Paul employed a human example. In the case of a covenant or an agreement, no one can change the agreement made between two parties once it has been ratified, not even the parties involved. If this is the case in human courts, then it is certainly the case for a divine covenant, like the one made with Abraham. It was established (Genesis 12:1-3) and ratified (Genesis 15:1-16) by God by a promise made to Abraham and his offspring (Jesus Christ). Thus, the Law, which was given 430 years later, cannot annul the covenant previously ratified by God (Galatians 3:17). Then, the covenant of promise is forever true. “For if inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise” (Galatians 3:18 ESV).

¹⁴ WCF SC Question 94.

What, then, about the law? It was added by God for transgressors. In the law the standard of God is revealed, and therefore, the knowledge of sin and the wrath of God are clearly made known. The law is to point us to the one who can save; it shows us our need for Jesus Christ, the heir to the world. The law bears witness to the Lord (Romans 3:21); it points us to Christ whom we receive by faith. His righteousness (his perfect adherence to the law, God's standard) is given to us, the descendants of Abraham by faith.

Abraham and Us (Romans 4:22-25)

The culmination of Paul's argument is found in these three verses as he applies all that he has said in Romans 3:20-4:21 to his readers and subsequently us, those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Abraham believed against hope and was fully convinced that God was able to do that which he had promised. This is the reason for which his faith received the righteousness credited to him. If God did that for Abraham, then he will certainly do the same for us since he is unchanging and eternal. God counts our faith for righteousness if we believe "in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25b ESV). You have been justified by faith in Jesus Christ on account of his sacrificial life and death and his glorious resurrection.