

VII. Just and Justifier

December 1/2/3, 2015

Romans 3:21-31

Aim: To reconcile how God can both be just in requiring judgment to satisfy His wrath against sinners, while at the same time justify the ungodly through the propitiation of Jesus Christ.

We now come to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, a doctrine that has provoked the most serious controversy in the history of the Christian church. The controversy resulted in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, which focused on the material cause of the doctrine of justification. The controversy involved this simple question: how can an unjust person ever hope to stand before the just judgment of God? In other words, how are we saved? This is a matter of eternal consideration. Luther insisted that justification by faith alone is the article upon which the church stands or falls, and if the church does not get this right, the church ceases to be an authentic church. If the church denies or obscures the doctrine of justification by faith alone, it is no longer a Christian body.

Romans 1:18-3:20, while important in its own right, is nevertheless preliminary to the main point that Paul wants to establish in this part of his letter: the availability of God's righteousness to all who respond in faith. This 'good news,' announced in 1:1, is now elaborated. The essential points are packed into 3:21-26, a passage that Luther called 'the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.' The remainder of the section (3:21-4:25) develops one major element of this extraordinarily dense passage: faith as the only basis for justification. In 3:27-31, Paul highlights the exclusivity of faith (3:28) as he makes a number of points clearly directed to a Jewish audience. In chapter 4, each of these points is reiterated with respect to Abraham, as other elements are also drawn into the picture. From this emphasis, we can surmise that Paul was well aware of the point at which his gospel was most often (and not only in Galatia) attacked and wanted to demonstrate as clearly as possible that faith was both the necessary and necessarily exclusive response of human beings to God's work of redemption.

As we have seen, Paul made and sustained the charge that all mankind is under the dynamic of sin and therefore radically corrupt. This dynamic presents a dilemma for both God and man. From the human point of view, how can we as such profoundly corrupt beings ever be made righteous in the sight of God? Divine justice demands the condemnation of mankind, yet divine love wants to reach out to the guilty human race. Given this great dilemma, we come to the universally acknowledged great divide of Paul's letter to the Romans: God with His heavenly creativity has come up with what I like to call 'The Miracle of Righteousness.' God's total answer is sufficient for man's total failure. These verses are certainly the turning point in Romans.

A. The Righteousness in Justification (Romans 3:21-26)

In a passage that is loaded with key theological terms, the phrase 'righteousness of God' (*dikaioynē theou*) stands out. It occurs four times (vv. 21, 22, 25, 26) while the related verb 'justify' (*dikaioō*) is found twice (vv. 24, 26) and the adjective 'just' (*dikaios*) once (v. 26).

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1. The Manifestation of God's Righteousness (3:21)

a) *Transition from the Old Covenant (3:21a)*

²¹*But now...*

Paul signals the transition to a new phase of his exposition of the gospel with 'But now.' As in 6:22, 7:6, 1 Cor. 15:20, Eph. 2:13, and Col. 1:22, 'but now' marks the shift in Paul's focus from the old era of sin's domination to the new era of salvation. 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. Romans 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 Romans 4 will show, before it also—will be transferred into it from the old era.

Paul's words, 'But now,' point back to the coming a few years earlier of the Son of God who was born of David's line, whom God raised from the dead (1:3-4). 'But now' signals the end of the former era of 'Law', so that 'from *now on*' a new age has come in which the 'righteousness of God is being displayed' under a new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6, 8, 9).

'But' translates an adversative, indicating a contrast, in this instance a wonderful and marvelous contrast—between man's total depravity and inability to please God and God's own provision of a way to Himself. Now, after backing all sinful mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, into the totally dark and seemingly inescapable corner of God's wrath (1:18-3:20), Paul begins to open the window of divine grace that lets in the glorious light of salvation through the righteousness that God Himself has provided.

b) *Contrast with the Old Covenant (3:21b)*

...the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...

As 'the wrath of God' dominated the old era (1:18), so 'the righteousness of God' dominates the new. 'Righteousness of God' means the same here as in Romans 1:17: the justifying activity of God. From God's side, this includes His eschatological intervention to vindicate and deliver His people, in fulfillment of His promises. From the human side, it includes the status of acquittal by the person so declared just.

First of all, Paul says, the righteousness that God imparts to believers is 'apart from the Law (*nomos*).' He is declaring that the righteousness God gives to believers is entirely 'apart from' obedience to *any* law, even God's own revealed law. God's righteousness is in no way based on human achievement, on anything that man can do in his own power.

The relationship of this manifestation of God's righteousness to the OT is indicated in two prepositional phrases that together display the combination of continuity and discontinuity in salvation history that is characteristic of Romans. The phrase, 'apart from the law,' reiterates the salvation-historical shift denoted by 'but now.' In the new era inaugurated by Christ's death, God has acted to deliver and vindicate His people 'apart from' the law. It is not primarily the law as something for humans to do, but the law as a system, as a stage in God's unfolding plan, that is in view here. 'Law' (*nomos*), then, refers to the 'Mosaic covenant,' that (temporary) administration set up between God and His people to regulate their lives and reveal their sin until the establishment of the promise in Christ.

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Do you see the sharp line that's drawn here? Here is a way to be justified with God in spite of the fact that all of us are morally corrupt. Here is a way to be justified with God in spite of the fact that we all have been rebels. Here is a way to be justified with God whether we've been the man without the Bible or the man with the Bible. Even though our hearts condemn us. Even though we have nothing good to bring.

What does the existence of this radical righteousness apart from the Law mean to us? Everything! Our radical corruption precludes any hope of making it by works. But the existence of a righteousness apart from works gives hope to us. The miracle of justification is possible because a special righteousness exists separate from works, a righteousness that comes to us through Jesus Christ.

c) Connection to the Old Covenant (3:21c)

...although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

But Paul hastens to balance this discontinuity in salvation history with a reminder of its continuity. While God's justifying activity in the new age takes part outside the confines of the Old Covenant, the OT as a whole anticipates and predicts this new work of God: God's righteousness is 'witnessed to by the law and the prophets.'

Before he presents the means for men to receive God's manifested righteousness, however, Paul declares that it not only is apart from legalism but is also divinely revealed. That truth was obviously directed primarily at Jews, whose whole religion centered in 'the Law and the Prophets,' a phrase commonly used to encompass all of God's written Word, what we now call the Old Testament. In other words, the apostle was not speaking about a new kind of righteousness, but about the divine righteousness that is spoken of throughout the Jewish Scriptures.

The 'law and the prophets' is Paul's way of referring to the *whole* of the Old Testament. In other words, he is pointing out that those scriptures foretold both the saving work of the Messiah and its announcement in the gospel bringing that salvation to the nations.

This doctrine of the gospel is rooted in the testimony of the Old Testament. The whole point of the law is to drive us to this One who possesses the righteousness we do not have. We find it in the teaching of the prophets. Paul will show us in Romans 4 that we are justified today on this side of the cross the same way that people in the Old Testament were justified.

The Law pointed to this radical righteousness as mankind kept falling short of the Law's commands. Along with this, the Law's insistence on blood sacrifice reminded mankind that the works of righteousness would never be enough. The Old Testament prophets witnessed to this radical righteousness by direct statement—for example, Isaiah 45:24. The Law and the Prophets bear witness to this righteousness apart from the Law.

Remember how Paul began, in 1:2, by showing us that his teaching is not unique to him or to the New Testament but is in the Old Testament too? And how in 3:10-12 he showed, once again, the continuity between his teaching and that of the Old Testament? Paul now quotes the Old Testament again. The Old Testament, just like the New, shows both the lostness of mankind and the means of salvation for mankind. There is no line to be drawn between the basic teaching of the Old and the New Testaments. The Bible is a total unity. We believe the Old Testament too. A true Bible-believing Christian is just as interested in reading the Old Testament as the New.

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The two compromise one message, one complete unity. There are not two religions, the Old Testament and the New Testament religion; there is only one.

2. The Access to God's Righteousness (3:22-23)

a) *How Access Is Provided (3:22a)*

²²*the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*

'Righteousness of God' is now considered from the 'human' side of the transaction: it is 'through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.' Picking up another key theme from 1:17, Paul highlights faith as the means by which God's justifying work becomes applicable to individuals.

The key to having the righteousness of God is *faith*. The redundancy of the opening line of verse 22 emphasizes this (cp. also Phil. 3:9). The gospel is universal; it is not just for Israel, but for the Gentile world as well. There is, however, a limiting factor. It is only for those who believe. This righteousness of God, available because of Christ, is available only 'unto all and upon all them that believe.'

Paul's point here is that the perfect, saving 'righteousness of God' not only is received apart from legalism and built on revelation, but is also acquired only by 'faith.' That has always been the only way of salvation as far as man's part is concerned. That is also a repeated theme of Paul's Roman epistle. The saving faith in Jesus Christ that the New Testament teachers is much more than a simple affirmation of certain truths about Him. Even the demons acknowledged many facts about Him. Saving faith is a placing of oneself totally in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be justified by faith is not to be justified because we have faith, in the sense that our faith now is the supreme work that makes us righteous. The language here of being justified by faith or through faith simply means that faith is the means by which we lay hold of Christ. It is the means by which the righteousness of Christ is bestowed upon us.

But if Paul mentions human faith in this phrase, why then does he add the phrase 'for all who believe'? Paul's purpose is probably to highlight the universal applicability of God's righteousness. God's righteousness is available only through faith in Jesus Christ—but it is available to *anyone* who has faith in Christ.

The words 'all who *believe*' are important. It is not that the Jews will be saved by doing the works of the Law and the Gentiles by believing the gospel. There are not two ways of salvation, one for Jews and another for Gentiles. That 'all' includes 'all' descendants of Adam, both Jews and Gentiles, as previous chapters have shown. God's righteous work of saving people only applies to those Jews and Gentiles who give themselves in faith to the Son of God.

b) *Why Access Is Needed (3:22b-23)*

For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

'There is no distinction' summarizes a key element in Paul's presentation in 1:18-3:20. In verse 23, Paul elaborates this point. His 'no distinction,' as we would expect, has to do with the absence of any basic difference among people with respect to their standing before God. Jews may have the law and circumcision; Americans may lay claim to a great religious heritage; 'good' people may point to their works of charity; but all this makes no essential difference to one's standing before the righteous and holy God.

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Just as everyone apart from Christ is equally sinful and rejected by God, everyone who is in Christ is equally righteous and accepted by Him. Even the ‘foremost of all’ sinners, as Paul called himself (1 Tim. 1:15), was not too wicked to be saved. There is no distinction among those who are saved, because there is no distinction among those who are lost.

In the midst of what would seem to be a climactic point in his presentation of the gospel, Paul returns to the crucial ‘first half’ of his message—for he realizes that the gospel is meaningless unless a person really understands the depth of his guilt before God. So Paul, at the very height of his gospel proclamation, returns again to the theme of sin. The verb tenses in v. 23 cover both past and present. In the past, all have sinned; in the present, all are coming short. Paul leaves no room for human egotism. In the past we have sinned, in the present we are sinning, and in the future we will continue to sin. Salvation by works is impossible in all directions.

Paul reduces the argument of 1:18-3:20 to its essence in a justly famous statement of the condition of all people outside Christ: ‘all have sinned and are falling short of the glory of God.’ The second verb states the consequences of the first: because all have sinned, all are falling short of the glory of God. *Hustereō* (‘fall short’) has the basic meaning of being last or inferior. Every human comes in last as far as ‘the glory of God’ is concerned.

‘Glory’ in the Bible characteristically refers to the magnificent presence of the Lord, and the eternal state was often pictured as a time when God’s people would experience and have a part in that ‘glory’ (e.g., Is. 35:2; Rom. 8:18; Phil. 3:21; 2 Th. 2:14). The future glory may be regarded as the restoration of the lost, original glory. Paul, then, is indicating that all people fail to exhibit that ‘being-like-God’ for which they were created.

3. The Gift of God’s Righteousness (3:24-25a)

a) *The Act of Justification (3:24a)*

...²⁴ and are justified...

Paul uses the verb ‘justify’ (*dikaioō*) for the first time in Romans to depict his distinctive understanding of Christian salvation. As Paul uses it in these contexts, the verb ‘justify’ means not ‘to make righteous’ (in an ethical sense) nor simply ‘to treat as righteous’ (though one is really not righteous), but ‘to declare righteous.’ 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. This judicial verdict is according to Paul rendered the moment a person believes. The act of justification is therefore properly ‘eschatological,’ as the ultimate verdict regarding a person’s standing with God is brought back into our present reality.

Dikaioō (‘justified’) means to declare the rightness of something or someone. Justification is God’s declaration that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Justification is a wholly forensic, or legal, transaction. It changes the judicial *standing* of the sinner before God. In justification, God *imputes* the perfect righteousness of Christ to the believer’s account, then declares the redeemed one fully righteous.

The verb ‘justified’ (*dikaioumenoi*) is related to the noun ‘righteousness’ (*dikaiosunē*) and might be better understood as ‘declared right.’ The righteous or saving work of God in the

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proclamation of the gospel is that He declares those who believe in Christ as ‘justified’ or ‘declared to be in the right’ with Him.

Justification comes to sinful men and women when God declares that their guilt is paid for on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Because of Christ’s sacrifice of Himself on the cross, God declares that we are righteous. Notice, I said that God ‘declares’ that our guilt is gone. The word *declares* is of utmost importance. God does not ‘infuse’ us with righteousness. It’s not something that is pumped into you. God makes a legal declaration. Our guilt before God is a legal matter. We have earned the declaration from God that we are guilty and therefore deserve His wrath. But on the basis of the finished work of Christ, God can declare us to be justified. He can declare that our guilt is gone. Salvation is first and foremost a legal matter, since it has to do with our guilt before God. Later, in Romans 5-7, we will discover that salvation has other aspects in this present life. Then in chapter 8 we’ll learn of the wonderful future aspects of salvation. But the first great thing we learn is that salvation removes our guilt. God declares, ‘Your guilt is gone.’

(1) Excursus 1: Justification (Sproul)

In justification, God makes a legal declaration, what we call a forensic declaration. Forensics has to do with the judicial judgment or declaration. What happens in justification is not a pardon; it is an act whereby God declares a person to be just. Justification is that act by which God judicially declares a person to be righteous in His sight.

In the sixteenth century, both Roman Catholics and Protestants agreed that in the final analysis, the act of justification is something God does, and it is a judicial declaration. The issue then and now is this: on what grounds does God make that declaration? Rome set forth their doctrine—and still does—that God will never declare a person just until that person actually, under divine scrutiny, is found to be just. Rome teaches that we cannot be just without grace, that we will never become just without faith, and that we will never become just without the assistance of Christ. We need faith, we need grace, we need Jesus. We need the righteousness of Christ infused or poured into our soul, but you must cooperate with that grace to such a degree that we will in fact become righteous. If we die with any impurity in our soul, thereby lacking complete righteousness, we will not go to heaven. If no mortal sin is present in our life, we will go to purgatory, which is the place of purging. The object of purgatory is to make us righteous so that we can be admitted into God’s heaven.

Part of the reason for this belief, that justification is rooted in an inherent righteousness in the sinner, comes from something unfortunate in church history. In the early centuries, when the Greek language passed away from the central attention of the church fathers and Latin became the dominant language, many scholars read only the Latin Bible, not the Greek Bible, and they borrowed the Roman or Latin word for justification, *iustificare*, from which we get the English word *justification*. The Latin verb *fiacre* means ‘to make’ or ‘to shape’ or ‘to do.’ *Iustus* means ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice,’ so *iustificare* literally means ‘to make righteous,’ which we believe is what happens in sanctification, not justification.

The Greek word that we are dealing with here in the Romans text is the word *dikaioō*, *dikaioōsunē*, which does not mean ‘to make righteous’ but rather ‘to declare righteous.’ In the Roman Catholic view, God will never pronounce a person just or righteous until, by the help of God’s grace and Christ, that person actually becomes righteous. Because the works for the flesh cannot make us righteous (cp. 3:20), the grounds for our justification cannot be found in us or in

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any righteousness inherent in our souls. That is why we so desperately need what Luther called a *iustia alienum*, an alien righteousness, a righteousness that comes from outside of ourselves. Luther called this righteousness *extranos*, outside of or apart from us.

In simple terms, this means that the only righteousness sufficient for us to stand before the judgment of God is the righteousness of Christ. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is only theological shorthand for the affirmation that justification is by Christ alone, by His righteousness, which is received by faith. When Paul speaks here about justification, he is not talking about pardon, and he is not talking about God's declaration of what he finds in us and in our behavior. He is talking about something else altogether.

One of the slogans formulated by Luther and widely repeated in the sixteenth century was a little Latin phrase: *simul iustus et peccator*: 'at the same time righteous and sinner.' The point of Luther's slogan was this: the Christian is someone who is at the very same time righteous and sinner. How can that be? While we are sinners, we are also righteous in God's sight by virtue of the legal transfer God made by assigning to us the righteousness of Jesus, if we put our trust in Christ. By virtue of this transfer, or the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to us, we are declared to be righteous while still sinners. That is the good news—we can be declared just by God while we are still sinners. That is the heart of the gospel. We do not have to wait to become perfectly righteous before we are acceptable to God.

b) *The Mode of Justification (3:24b)*

...by his grace as a gift...

'Grace' is one of Paul's most significant theological terms. He uses it typically not to describe a quality of God but the way in which God has acted in Christ: unconstrained by anything beyond His own will. God's justifying verdict is totally unmerited. People have done, and can do, nothing to earn it. This belief is a 'theological axiom' for Paul and is the basis for his conviction that justification can never be attained through works, or the law (cp. Rom. 4:3-5, 13:16; 11:16), but only through faith. Once this is recognized, the connection between v. 22a and v. 24 is clarified; that justification is a matter of grace on God's side means that it must be a matter of faith on the human side. But the gracious nature of justification also answers to the dilemma of people who are under the power of sin (v. 23).

God justifies believers 'as a gift by His grace,' not because of any good thing in the one who is justified. By definition, a 'gift' is something given freely, unearned and unmerited by the recipient. The law reveals God's righteousness and exposes man's unrighteousness. 'Grace,' on the other hand, not only reveals God's righteousness, but actually *gives* His righteousness to those who trust in His Son.

c) *The Cost of Justification (3:24c)*

...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...

'Redemption' means, basically 'liberation through the payment of a price.' Thus, in the second and first centuries BC, 'redemption' often refers to the 'ransoming' of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals. If 'redemption' has this connotation here, then Paul would be presenting Christ's death as a 'ransom,' a 'payment' that takes the place of that penalty for sins 'owed' by all people to God. While the 'price' connoted by the word 'redemption' was 'paid' at the cross in the blood of Christ, the redeeming work that the payment made possible is, like justification, applied to each person when he or she believes.

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Apolutrōsis ('redemption') is a strengthened form of *lutrōsis*, which carries the idea of delivering, especially by means of paying a price. It was commonly used of paying a ransom to free a prisoner from his captors or paying the price to free a slave from his master. Only the sinless Savior could pay the price to redeem sinful men.

Whereas the word 'propitiation' captures the language of Leviticus in relation to the sacrifices of the Temple, the word 'redemption' portrays the desperate slave prisoners escaping from Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. By Christ's death, God liberates the captives from the prospect of an adverse verdict that, like the sword of Damocles, hangs precariously by a thread above our heads.

God's grace, His redemption, is free to us. But it isn't free in the sense that nobody paid for it. The reason it is free to us is because Jesus has paid the price. In one sense God never really forgives anyone's sin. He can't. If God forgave a single sin in the sense of just closing His eyes to it, we would no longer live in a moral universe. God Himself would no longer be moral. So He doesn't forgive a single sin; every sin is punished. Yet, because Jesus paid the price for our sin, the matter is settled.

If we ask the further question, "To whom was the "ransom" paid?", it is not clear that we need to answer it. Certainly we are not to think of Christ's death as a payment of God made to Satan, a view that became very popular in the first centuries of the Christian church. A more biblical answer, and one that might be implied by v. 25, would be that God, the judge who must render just verdicts, is the recipient of the ransom. If so, an equal emphasis must be placed on the fact that God is also the originator of the liberating process.

d) The Initiator of Justification (3:25a)

...²⁵whom God put forward...

The focus shifts from human reception of God's justifying work to God's initiative in providing for it. Specifically, Paul now unfolds the nature and means of 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,' showing that this redemption takes place at the will and initiative of God the Father. The first five Greek words of v. 25 form the main clause of this new sentence. The verb in this clause could be translated either 'propose, plan' or 'display publicly.' Redemption is 'in Christ' in that God 'displayed Him publicly,' or 'set Him forth as a sacrifice' on the cross as a *hilastērion*. Nor should it be missed that it is God who thus takes the initiative in the process of redemption – not Christ, and certainly not human beings.

Because man cannot become righteous on his own, God graciously provided for his redemption through the atoning sacrifice of His own Son, Jesus Christ.

e) The Means of Justification (3:25b)

...as a propitiation by his blood ...

Hilastērion ('propitiation') carries the basic idea of appeasement, or satisfaction. In ancient pagan religions, as in many religions today, the idea of man's appeasing a deity by various gifts or sacrifices was common. But in the New Testament, 'propitiation' always refers to the work of God, not of man. Man is utterly incapable of satisfying God's justice except by spending an eternity in hell. The only satisfaction, or 'propitiation,' that could be acceptable to God and that could reconcile Him to man had to be made by God.

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‘Propitiation’ has reference to the turning away of wrath, and the appeasement of the ‘wrath of the gods’ by various means is a frequent theme in Greek literature. The OT frequently connects the ‘covering,’ or forgiving, of sins with the removal of God’s wrath. It is precisely the basic connotation of ‘propitiate’ that led the translators of the LXX to use the *hilask-* words for the Hebrew words denoting the covering of sins. The conclusion that *hilastērion* includes references to the turning away of God’s wrath is inescapable.

The Hebrew equivalent of *hilastērion* is used in the Old Testament in reference to the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies, where the high priest went once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to make a sacrifice on behalf of his people.

A ‘propitiation’ is a covering. Under the law in the Old Testament, the ‘mercy seat’ covered the Ark of the Covenant. Now, Christ’s death on the cross covers our sins. But Christ’s death doesn’t cover the sins of just anyone, only the sins of ‘all them that believe.’ Christ’s death brings about ‘the remission of sins.’ Nothing else, no additional work on our part, needs to be added. Christ’s death is a complete propitiation. It covers everything.

What Paul means by designating Christ a *hilastērion* has been the subject of considerable debate. When the use of *hilastērion* in the Bible is considered, a strong case can be made for taking the word as a reference to the OT ‘mercy seat,’ the cover over the ark where Yahweh appeared (Lev. 16:2), and on which sacrificial blood was poured. For this is what the word refers to in its one other NT occurrence (Heb. 9:5), as well as in 21 of its 27 LXX occurrences. In the OT and Jewish tradition, this ‘mercy seat’ came to be applied generally to the place of atonement. By referring to Christ as this ‘mercy seat,’ then, Paul would be inviting us to view Christ as the New Testament equivalent, or antitype, to this Old Covenant ‘place of atonement,’ and, derivatively, to the ritual of atonement itself.

The word ‘propitiation’ is used twenty times in the Greek Old Testament to denote the golden cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the so-called mercy seat, the place where the priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice to assuage God’s just wrath on sin. In using this symbol, Paul had several things in mind. He remembered that the mercy seat was the place where God manifested His *presence* in Israel (Ex. 25:22). Paul also knew that God manifested His *glory* at the mercy seat (Lev. 16:13). Most of all, the apostle remembered that the priest had to sprinkle blood seven times on the mercy seat to make *atonement* for God’s people and to turn away God’s wrath at their sins (Lev. 16:14ff.).

Christ, Paul implies, now has the place that the ‘mercy seat’ had in the Old Covenant: the center and focal point of God’s provision of atonement for His people. Since this atonement takes place by means of Christ’s death as a sacrifice, and the word *hilastērion* includes reference to propitiation, translations such as ‘means of propitiation’ and ‘propitiatory sacrifice’ are not inaccurate, but may be too restrictive. ‘Mercy seat’ would be all right if the broader theological connotations of the phrase were obvious; but considering the breadth of the concept to which the term refers, ‘sacrifice of atonement’ is as good as we can do.

(1) Excursus 2: Propitiation and Expiation (Sproul)

The words *expiation* and *propitiation* are two of the most glorious words that we find anywhere in the Old Testament.

Propitiation means to satisfy the demands of justice. In biblical terms, it means to satisfy the demands of God’s wrath. Propitiation satisfies completely the demands of God’s wrath and

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justice, which is what the cross was all about. Christ as our substitute took upon Himself the wrath that we deserve, to pay the penalty that was due for our guilt to satisfy the demands of God's justice. In His work of propitiation, Jesus did something on a vertical level, something with respect to the Father, satisfying the justice of God for us.

Expiation has to do directly with us. The prefix *ex-* means 'away from' or 'out of.' One of the benefits of justification is the remission of sin, our sin being removed from us. Our sin goes away. When the New Testament speaks about expiation, it is referring to the sense in which Christ removes our sin and takes it away (cp. Ps. 103:12).

In the work of Christ, there is propitiation and expiation. The vertical dimension of justification is the propitiation, the satisfaction, that Christ has accomplished for us before the Father. The horizontal dimension is expiation, whereby Christ not only satisfied the justice of the Father but also removed our sins from us. We must not lose these words, *propitiation* and *expiation*. They so richly capture the essence of the gospel that stands upon what Christ did on the cross in paying for our guilt and in His life of perfect obedience in earning the righteousness that He freely gives us.

f) *The Instrument of Justification (3:25c)*

...to be received by faith.

The phrase, 'through faith,' modifies *hilastērion* and indicates the means by which individuals appropriate the benefits of the sacrifice. 'In His blood' singles out Christ's blood as the means by which God's wrath is propitiated. As in several other texts where Christ's blood is the means through which salvation is secured (Rom. 5:9; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 1:20), the purpose is to designate Christ's death as a sacrifice.

Those who are sanctified by the offering of Christ are those who receive that sanctification 'through faith' in Him.

There are two factors in salvation: the basis and the instrument. The basis of our salvation is the finished work of Jesus Christ, without a hair's breadth of any human good works added to the scale. The instrument by which we share in this salvation is our faith, our believing God. Our faith does not have saving value. We're not saved on the basis of our faith. We're saved only on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. But the instrument by which we share in this is our faith. Our faith links us to the salvation Christ provides. Our faith is the empty hands that accept the gift of salvation.

(1) Excursus 3: Faith (Sproul)

The Roman Catholic Church defines faith as important and indeed essential to justification. Faith is the foundation for justification, but the instrumental cause of justification, according to Rome, is the sacrament of baptism.

The philosopher Aristotle examined different ways that change is brought about. He said the word *cause*, in and of itself was too vague. We need to be more specific if we are going to be scientific in discerning various types of causes. Aristotle used a piece of sculpture as an illustration. Aristotle said there is a *material cause*, the stuff out of which something is brought to pass; the material cause in the case of a sculpture is the block of stone. Then there is the *formal cause*, which is the idea that the sculptor has before he creates his piece of art. The *efficient cause* is the one whose work brings about the change. In the case of the sculpture, the

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efficient cause is the sculptor. The *final cause* is the purpose for which something is made. In the case of the sculpture, the final cause might be to beautify an emperor's garden. Aristotle also spoke of the *instrumental cause*, which is the means by which the sculptor shapes that stone into a beautiful statue. The instruments the sculptor uses are the chisel and the hammer. The instruments are the means by which the change takes place.

Rome says the instrumental cause of justification is baptism, in the first instance, and the sacrament of penance, in the second instance. If someone loses his justification through mortal sin, he can have it restored through the sacrament of penance, which includes doing works of satisfaction. In the sixteenth century Rome declared that the sacraments are the means by which a person is made righteous, but the Reformers said that the instrumental cause of our justification is not the sacraments. Faith is the only instrument by which one is linked to Christ and receives his righteousness.

4. The Justness of God's Righteousness (3:25d-26)

a) *The Purpose of Justification (3:25d-26a)*

(1) Then (3:25d)

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

The third prepositional phrase in the series indicates the purpose for which God 'set forth Christ as a sacrifice of atonement:' 'for a demonstration of His righteousness because of the passing over of sins committed beforehand in the forbearance of God.' The sins 'committed beforehand' are not sins committed before conversion, or baptism, but before the new age of salvation. This does not mean that God failed to punish or 'overlooked' sins committed before Christ; nor does it mean that God did not really 'forgive' sins under the Old Covenant. Paul's meaning is rather that God 'postponed' the full penalty due sins in the Old Covenant, allowing sinners to stand before Him without their having provided an adequate 'satisfaction' of the demands of His holy justice (cp. Heb. 10:4). In view of this, it is clear that 'His righteousness' must have reference to some aspect of God's character that might have been called into question because of His treating sins in the past with less than full severity, and that has now been demonstrated in setting forth Christ as 'the propitiatory.' Likely, this is a general reference to God's 'consistency' in always acting in accordance with His character.

Simply put, in the past God did not pour out His full wrath on men for their sins. He was patient and merciful. Some might question His righteousness in doing this. However, in Jesus' death He demonstrated His wrath against sin. It is here—in Christ being the mercy seat—that we see the miraculous love and creativity of God. God found a way to forgive us and yet maintain His moral integrity. He forgave us without condoning our sin. How? By directing toward Himself, in the person of His Son, the full weight of the wrath we deserved. Thus God's holy character is not compromised.

God not only *manifested* His divine righteousness by offering His own Son, but also used that act of divine grace 'to demonstrate His' divine 'righteousness.' That greatest of all acts of God's grace was further demonstrated by His divine 'forbearance,' as 'He passed over the sins previously committed.' God is not unaware of nor does He condone even the smallest sin. His forbearance is therefore not a sign of injustice but of His patient and loving grace. *Paresis*

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(‘passed over’) does not carry the idea of remission, but refers to passing by or overlooking. In the context of God’s ‘forbearance,’ the meaning is therefore that of a temporary passing over sin and of withholding judgment on it for a certain period of time.

God set forth Christ in His death as a ‘propitiation’ and as a ‘redemption.’ This, says Paul, was ‘to demonstrate’ two realities. First, the propitiatory and redemptive death of Christ demonstrates God’s righteous activity in ‘passing over’ sins ‘previously committed’ in the ‘patience of God.’ Paul is thinking about sins committed in the aeons prior to the death of Christ. He is saying that Christ’s death somehow stayed the hand of God’s wrath beforehand. In other words, Christ’s death was effective, to a degree, ahead of Good Friday. Paul is not saying that these sinners were thereby saved, but rather that God’s hand of final wrath in the judgment of the world was held back in anticipation of the death of Christ.

(2) Now (3:26a)

²⁶*It was to show his righteousness at the present time...*

Second, that death ended a former aeon and inaugurated the final age, ‘the now time’ as Paul calls it. In the former aeon, God merely ‘passed over’ sins, held back the flood of His wrath. But ‘now’ God is ‘righteous’ and ‘declares righteous’ the person ‘who believes in Jesus.’

The phrase, ‘For a demonstration of His righteousness at the present time,’ resumes the topic of the demonstration of God’s righteousness after the intervening qualifiers and adds the important point that this demonstration has significance not only for the past but also for the present age. Paul’s point is that God can maintain His righteous character (‘His righteousness’ in vv. 25 and 26) even while He acts to justify sinful people (‘God’s righteousness’ in vv. 21 and 22) because Christ, in His propitiatory sacrifice, provides full satisfaction of the demands of God’s impartial, invariable justice.

b) *The Justice of Justification* (3:26b)

...so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

A better translation, to capture the sense of the Greek, would be, ‘that He might be just *and yet* the justifier of him who believes in Jesus.’ In a way, this phrase and the verses that surround it constitute the center of the whole Bible, for they answer the most profound of all questions: How can God remain the absolutely just ruler of the universe, and yet justify me, an ungodly sinner?

Note, first of all, that God *must* remain absolutely just, or we have no real basis for moral standards. It is impossible to have moral standards without there being a moral absolute. The moral absolute is the perfectly ‘just’ character of God Himself. That’s why 3:26 is such a key verse. Because Jesus has borne our guilt on the cross, God can remain ‘just.’ The moral basis of our universe can be upheld. Yet at that same time He can be the ‘justifier’ of all those who believe in and accept Christ’s payment for their sin. God’s love is seen, not in forgiving sin, but rather in sending His only Son, Jesus Christ, to pay the price, to be the covering for all our sin. God maintains His holiness. He doesn’t deviate from His total justice. And yet, without abandoning His moral law, He can fully justify anyone who believes in Jesus and accept His perfect sacrifice for sin.

There is no such thing as cheap grace. The gospel is not simply an announcement of pardon. In justification God does not merely decide to unilaterally forgive us our sins. God never negotiates His righteousness. God will never lay aside His holiness to save us. God demands and requires

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that sin be punished. Christ had to die because, according to God, the propitiation had to be made; sin had to be punished. Our sin had to be punished. In the drama of justification, God remains just. He does not set aside His justice. He does not wave His righteousness; He insists upon it. We cannot be justified without righteousness, but the glory of His grace is that His justice is served vicariously by a substitute that He appointed. God's mercy is shown in that what saves us is not our righteousness. It is somebody else's. We get in on someone else's coattails—that is grace. That somebody, our Redeemer, is perfectly righteous and has fulfilled the justice of God for us perfectly. That is the glory of justification. God demonstrates that He is both just and justifier. If all He did was maintain His righteousness without extending the imputation of that righteousness to us, He would still be just, but He would not be the justifier. However, He is both just and justifier, which is the marvel of the gospel.

So who is eligible for this covering of sin? Anyone? Everyone? Even though Christ's death is a sufficient covering for all sins, there is a condition on who will receive this covering. This covering of sin, this justification, applies only to 'everyone that believes' (1:16), to 'all them that believe' (3:22), to 'him who believes' (3:26). Which individuals does God justify? He justifies those who through faith accept what Christ has done for them, those who are united to the work of Jesus Christ with the instrument of faith.

Luther called this paragraph 'the chief point...of the whole Bible' because it focuses on what Luther thought was the heart of the Bible: justification by faith. Luther believes that this 'article' was vital: 'if that article stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church falls.' In Luther's day, of course, 'justification by faith' was a polemical thrust against a Roman Catholic teaching that insisted on the place of human cooperation in the grace of justification. Hence, to the *sola fide* of the Reformers was added *sola gratia* – 'by grace alone.' With these phrases, the Reformers expressed their conviction that justification is, from first to last, a matter of God's own doing, to which human beings must respond but to which they can add nothing.

B. The Faith in Justification (Romans 3:27-31)

In 3:27-4:25, Paul expounds the great theological thesis of 3:21-26. Or, to be more accurate, he expounds one key element in that thesis. For we hear no more in 3:27-4:25 about the atonement, or the demonstration of God's righteousness, or the provision for sins under the Old Covenant. Rather, Paul concentrates on the vital theme stated in v. 22: 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.' Faith is the topic in every paragraph of this section of the letter, as Paul uses a series of antitheses to draw out the nature and implications of faith as the sole means of justification. With these contrasts, Paul enunciates what has become a hallmark of the Reformation teaching: *sola fide* – that 'faith alone' is the means by which a person can be brought into relationship with the God of the Bible. *Sola fide*, Paul argues in this section, is necessary to maintain *sola gratia*: 'by grace alone.' But it is also necessary in order to ensure that Gentiles have equal access with Jews to the one God. Paul is intent on showing how his gospel breaks the boundaries of the Old Covenant while at the same time standing in continuity with it; continuity within discontinuity is his theme. Such balance was necessary if the Romans were to understand and appreciate Paul's gospel as a message that meets the needs of all people.

The style in this section, as in 2:1-5, 17-29, and 3:1-8, reflects the diatribe method of argumentation, with the question-and-answer format. It is difficult to say—and perhaps not all

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that important—whether we have here a ‘real’ dialogue between Paul and a Jewish interlocutor, or whether Paul himself is responsible for posing questions to himself as a means of making his points.

1. Faith Excludes Boasting (3:27-28)

a) *The Law of Works Denied (3:27)*

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.*

If my faith has saving value, if my suffering has saving value, if my religious works have saving value, if my moral works have saving value, I could boast before God on that basis: ‘You owe it to me.’ But as we have seen up to this point in Romans, we humans are all in a decidedly unhumanist situation. We have all sinned. We have all rebelled. And since we have sinned and rebelled against an infinite God, we are infinitely guilty. There is only one hope for us—the grace of God. This is our only hope. There is no room for boasting.

The cross proves the utter futility of man’s coming to God in his own way and power. Because the power of salvation is in the cross of Christ alone, man has no cause for self-congratulation or self-satisfaction – much less for the self-exaltation that is now so widely proclaimed under the guise of the gospel.

‘Boasting,’ of course, is a sin common to all people – it reflects the pride that is at the root of so much human sinfulness. But Paul is probably thinking here particularly of Jews and their boasting. This is suggested by his elaboration in terms of the ‘law’ in vv. 27b-28, by his dialogical style – the ‘Jew’ has been his dialogue partner earlier (cp. 2:17), and by the focus on Jew and Gentile in vv. 29-30. Paul’s reason for excluding boasting has to do with a contrast between faith and works (vv. 27b-28)—two kinds of human response to God. And this is confirmed by the parallel teaching about Abraham in chapter 4.

Paul’s explanation for the exclusion of boasting rests on a contrast between ‘works’ and ‘faith.’ What is striking about this contrast is that Paul formulates it with the help of the word ‘law’ (*nomos*); ‘Through what *nomos* [is boasting excluded]? [Through the *nomos*] of works? No, but through the *nomos* of faith.’ Paul is contrasting two different meanings of the word ‘law.’ On this view, the word *nomos*, in both its actual occurrences in the verse, has a metaphorical sense: ‘principle,’ or ‘rule.’ It is not through the Torah, that law which demands works, through which boasting is excluded; it is through the ‘rule’ of faith, the ‘ordinance’ or ‘demand’ of God for faith as the basis for justification. Rather than being entirely metaphorical, then, Paul’s use of *nomos*, embodies a ‘play on words,’ in which the characteristic demand of the Mosaic covenant—works—is contrasted with the basic demand of the New Covenant (and of the OT, broadly understood; cp. chapter 4)—faith.

The root issue here is not the Jew’s pride in a covenant relationship with God, but the pride in accomplishments, the tendency for the Jew to think that his obedience to the law constituted some kind of claim on God, that Paul rejects. There is nothing at all wrong with doing the law, according to Paul. The problem, rather, is when doing the law is regarded as an achievement on the basis of which a relationship with God could be established or maintained. This is wrong because justification can come only by faith. Certainly, the centrality of the law in the Jewish religion rendered Jews very susceptible to a ‘legalistic’ tendency; but all people, being fallen exhibit the same tendency: Greeks, boasting in their wisdom (cp. 1. Cor. 1:19-31); Americans,

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boasting in their ‘American way of life;’ and all too many Christians, boasting in their ‘good deeds’ instead of in the grace of God.

When it comes to salvation, boasting is unthinkable. Everything is of God. This is a call for humility and humility paves the way for the exhilarating, infinite grace of God to deluge our bankrupt human hearts and bring us life. This is where all who are without Christ must begin. They must put down their pride and boasting and come with empty hands that they might receive this radical, true righteousness.

b) The Law of Faith Applied (3:28)

²⁸*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

In this verse Paul explains ‘the *nomos* of faith.’ It is a ‘rule’ or ‘principle’ pertaining to faith that ‘a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Luther’s famous addition of *sola* (‘alone’) to *fide* (‘faith’) brings out the true sense intended by Paul. A serious erosion of the full significance of Paul’s gospel occurs if we soften this antithesis: no works, whatever their nature or their motivation, can play any part in making a sinner right with God.

This is Paul’s great conclusion, and this verse was so very crucial to Martin Luther’s understanding of the gospel. This was Luther’s verse, and it should be ours as well.

2. Faith Includes Gentiles (3:29-30)

a) The Universality of God (3:29)

²⁹*Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also...*

‘Or’ introduces the alternative to the principle set forth in v. 28: if justification is by works of the law, then only those ‘in the law’ can be justified, and God becomes the God of the Jews only. Paul rejects this alternative with the question, ‘Is He not also the God of the Gentiles?’

b) The Unity of God (3:30)

³⁰*...since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.*

Paul explains why God must be God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews and draws an implication from that truth. Paul takes one of the most basic of Jewish beliefs, monotheism, and turns it against Judaism. The ‘oneness’ of God was confessed by the pious Jew every day: ‘the LORD our God is one LORD’ (Dt. 6:4). Yet if this is so, then God must be God of the Gentiles; else they would be left with no god. To be sure, Jews also believed that God was God of the whole world. But the limitations they placed upon this concept illustrate the radicality of Paul’s argument. In this paragraph, as in many other places in Romans, Paul makes clear that the Torah no longer functions as the ‘dividing wall’ between those who are outside and those who are inside the sphere of God’s people. Monotheism, as Paul has come to see it in Christ, means that there can be no such barrier; all must have equal access to God, and this can be guaranteed only if faith, not works in obedience to the Jewish law, is made the ‘entrance requirement.’ Just as there is only one God, there is only one way of salvation—faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul confronts the Jewish objector with the creed he recites daily, ‘Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is *One*’ (Dt. 6:4). He is God of, God to, and God for both Jews and Gentiles, as in Paul’s reply to the question of the previous verse. Furthermore, He does not discriminate between the ‘circumcision’ and the ‘uncircumcision’ as to the way to the righteousness of God. Since both

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Jew and Gentile are ‘under sin’ and ‘under judgment,’ there is only one way for both to find salvation, by faith.

The twin realities that God is One and there is one way to righteousness for both Jews and Gentiles relates directly to a pastoral concern of this letter. At that time, apparently, Jewish and Gentile believers were meeting separately. Paul’s passion, however, was that each welcome the other and that ‘together’ they may ‘with *one* voice glorify the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (15:1, 6). Note that there is ‘one’ God who is to be glorified by all races with ‘one’ voice.

3. Faith Upholds the Law (3:31)

³¹*Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

This question was raised by Paul himself, but undoubtedly reflected an objection he had heard frequently as he preached to the Jews: ‘Do we then nullify the law through faith?’ How would faith nullify the law? Through Paul’s emphasis on faith ‘alone,’ to the exclusion of ‘works of the law,’ in justification. But, as on other occasions when Paul faces such an objection (cp. 7:7), he responds with a forthright denial: ‘By no means!’ He then follows this up with a counter-assertion: ‘Rather, we establish the law.’ That Paul affirms here a continuing role for the law, despite its playing no part in justification is clear. But what is that role?

As far as salvation is concerned, the gospel does not replace the law, because the law was never a means of salvation. The law was given to show men the perfect standards of God’s righteousness and to show that those standards are impossible to meet in man’s own power. The purpose of the law was to drive men to faith in God. The cross establishes, or confirms, the law in three ways. First, it establishes the law by paying the penalty of death, which the law demanded for failing to fulfill perfectly and completely its righteous requirements. Second, the cross establishes the law by fulfilling its purpose of driving men to faith in Jesus Christ. Third, the cross establishes the law by providing believers the potential for fulfilling it.

Just how does salvation through faith ‘establish’ the law? It establishes the law because salvation through faith was the purpose of the law (cp. Gal. 3:24).

The stress on *faith* as establishing the law suggests that it is law as fulfilled in and through our faith in Christ that Paul thinks of here. In 8:4, Paul will argue that those who are in Christ and who ‘walk according to the Spirit’ have the law fulfilled ‘in them,’ in the sense that their relationship to Christ by faith fully meets the demands of God’s law. While we cannot be certain, it is likely that Paul means essentially the same thing here: that Christian faith, far from shunting aside the demands of the law, provides (and for the first time!) the complete fulfillment of God’s demand in His law.

For next time: Read Romans 4:1-25.