

GOD JUSTIFIES SINNERS BY FAITH IN CHRIST

Romans 3:21-31

Key Verse: 3:24

“...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

In the last passage we learned that God is kind, tolerant and patient. Although sinful people deserve immediate and severe punishment, God does not punish us as our sins deserve. He waits for us to repent. In the meantime, God performs acts of kindness for us constantly. We all have at least 100 reasons to thank God each and every day. But instead of repenting—instead of thanking God and glorifying God—we sinful human beings abuse God’s kindness. We harden our hearts, justify ourselves, and make many excuses. Sinful human beings are all escape artists. Yet we cannot escape from God’s righteous judgment. Whether it is by the law written in the Bible, or by the law written on our hearts, we are all exposed as wretched sinners. We deserve God’s wrath and his righteous judgment. There is no exception.

However, God did not leave us alone in our helplessness. In today’s passage we learn what God has done for sinners by his one-sided grace. God made a way to justify sinners. This justification is by faith in Jesus Christ. It is available to all who believe. May God help us to have faith that we are justified before God through Jesus Christ.

First, a righteousness from God through faith in Christ (21-22a).

Look at verse 21. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” As we have studied, the Almighty God, the Righteous Judge, could have destroyed all mankind because of our sins, as he did the people of Noah’s time. This is what the law demanded. But God did not do so. Rather, in his great mercy, God gave us a righteousness apart from law. This refers to Jesus Christ. Instead of punishing sinners, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins according to his promises. In Jesus Christ we can have a righteousness from God.

Righteousness is to have a right relationship with God. We can see this beautiful relationship in the life of Jesus. When he was about to begin his public ministry, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was an act of submission to God’s will; Jesus took his place in God’s history. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and God spoke to him from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3:22). Thus, to be right with God is to be accepted by God, recognized by God, and loved by God as the object of his pleasure. At the same time, it is to be submissive to God’s will and obedient to the life direction God has given us. When we have this kind of relationship with God, we are righteous. God looks at us and says, “You are very good. I love you. I am pleased with you.” One who is right with God has inexpressible joy. One who is right with God has absolute meaning of life. One who is right with God delights in the love and blessing of God. One who is right with God has absolute assurance of eternal life and the kingdom of God.

In Paul’s time this way of righteousness, apart from law, had been made known; before this, it had been a mystery. Still, it was foretold by God in the Law and the Prophets. For example, when God called Abraham, he promised to bless all peoples on earth through him (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Galatians 3:8 explains that this promise was fulfilled by Jesus Christ who brought the blessing of forgiveness of sins to all who believe in him. As another example, the prophet Isaiah foretold the suffering, death and resurrection of the Christ. In fact, in Isaiah 53, he gave such a comprehensive and vivid picture that it is unsurpassed, even now. The movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” opens by quoting Isaiah 53:5, “...by his wounds we are healed.” More significantly, Apostle John wrote his gospel against the background of Isaiah. He says in John 12:41, “Isaiah...saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.” As another example, the prophet Jeremiah perceived that God would establish a new way of righteousness with a new covenant. The new covenant would focus on man’s heart relationship with God. As Jeremiah 31:33,34 say, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people...For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” This new covenant was commenced by Jesus during the Last Supper. The Law and the Prophets testify to the righteousness that comes by faith.

Look at verse 22a. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Simply speaking, we can have righteousness from God when we believe in Jesus Christ. Of course, when we look at ourselves, we know that we are not righteous at all. We are full of sins, faults, and weaknesses. We do not merit

being called God's children. However, when we simply believe in Jesus, we are right with God by faith. We can learn this faith from a robber who was crucified with Jesus. This man had committed terrible crimes. Maybe he was a drug dealer who robbed to support his habit. In the course of robbing he was violent. Maybe he shot a convenience store clerk and ran away. But he was caught, convicted and sentenced to death. He was getting what his deeds deserved. Yet on the cross, he heard Jesus pray, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). He saw God in Jesus. He understood God's love in Jesus. He understood the meaning of Jesus' cross. He believed that even he could be accepted as a child of God. So he prayed, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:42-43). When he simply trusted in Christ, this man received salvation and eternal life in paradise. He was justified as a precious child of God by faith in Christ.

Second, sin is the root problem of all men (22b-23).

Look at verses 22b,23. "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...." On God's bottom line, there is no real difference between people. All people suffer from the universal problem of sin. We like to make many kinds of distinctions between and among us. There are religious and secular; rich and poor; republicans and democrats; Northwestern students and UC students; seniors and freshmen; artists and athletes, and so on. But in the final analysis, to God, these distinctions are superficial and irrelevant. In the sight of God all people are sinners and they have a fatal destiny because of sin.

In verse 23, Paul says that because of sin, people fall short of the glory of God. Paul's explanation of sin differs from the common understanding of many. Sin is not merely doing something wrong, such as stealing a pen from one's neighbor, or cheating on an exam by peeking at a classmate's answer, or gossiping about someone we don't like behind his back. Surely, such acts of wrongdoing are sins. But God's standard is much higher than adhering to a code of conduct. God is grieved that we fall short of the glory of God.

In verse 23, the word "glory" comes from the Greek word "doxa," which refers to the standard weight used in a scale or balance. God made man to measure up to a certain standard, his own standard. First of all, God made man in his own image. So when God sees a man he wants to see his own image in the man. In other words, man's character and nature should reflect God's attributes. In addition, God made man for a great mission. Thus, God has great expectations for man. But when God sees man, he is completely disappointed in him because he does not measure up to God's standard, due to his sins. Man should rule the whole world with love and wisdom, bringing perfect order, harmony and beauty. Instead, man became like a creature of instinct, who labors only to survive and seeks petty pleasures. God made man to be "world class" in whatever he does, be it music, art, scholarship, etc. But because of sin, people are mediocre, even in their own homes.

Sin robs man of the power to meet God's standard. For example, when God expects man to finish seven Ph.D. degrees, man is still struggling to pass first grade. When God expects man to be a father, he remains like a little baby in diapers. One young father was watching television with his little boy, eating popcorn. The father was so engrossed that he forgot his son was there. Pretty soon, he was startled by his son's voice, saying, "Dad, you ate all the popcorn." God made woman to be the mother of all the living. She should embrace and nurture her children and teach them how to fear God and be a blessing. In addition, she should watch out for her neighbor's children and pray for all peoples of all nations. But sin makes her like a spoiled teenager, even when she is a mother. Sin mars the image of God in people. Sin makes people fall short of God's glory. This is the real problem of all people.

Third, justification and redemption in Christ Jesus (24).

How can God give righteousness to ugly sinners who fall short of the glory of God? Look at verse 24. "...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." This verse says that God justifies sinners freely by his grace. In essence, God, who is the Righteous Judge, declares sinners to be "not guilty." In this way, God justifies sinners. God's declaration vindicates sinners, freeing us from condemnation and punishment. Justification restores us to a right standing before God. This is done freely by God's grace. We don't deserve it. We cannot earn it. We cannot buy it. But God does it.

The word "justification" is essentially a legal term. But the transaction that it describes is not merely legal. It is an act of God's love. It reveals God's heart toward sinners. In justification, God declares sinners to be his children. God

recognizes sinners as the object of his love and pleasure. As amazing as it seems, to be justified is to be recognized and loved by God, as Jesus was recognized and loved by God. When the prodigal son returned to his father, he brought only his repentance. He had sinned against heaven and against his father. He could not expect to be reinstated as a son; he only hoped to become one of his father's hired men. But his father, upon seeing him coming in the distance, ran toward his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Then the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Lk 15:20-24). The prodigal son was accepted by his father with the full rights and privileges of a son. The prodigal son was accepted by his father with compassion and great affection. In the same way, God accepts sinners as his own precious children by their faith in Jesus Christ.

Wait a minute! How can the Righteous Judge simply declare sinners to be "not guilty" when they are obviously guilty? Look at verse 24 again. "...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." God can justify sinners through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. What does "redemption" mean? The word "redemption" came from the slave markets. Some people understood that slavery was a terrible injustice. They wanted to do something about it. So they would go to the slave market, buy a slave, and then set him free. They called this an act of "redemption." In the same way, sinners need to be redeemed from the bondage of sin. Jesus said in John 8:34. "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." Sometimes we take the power of sin lightly, like the person who, while eating a chocolate bar, says, "I can lose weight anytime I want to." But when we really struggle with sin, we realize the undeniable power of sin. Sin enslaves people. We are helpless before the power of sin. God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to this world to redeem us from bondage to sin and the devil. God redeemed us by paying a ransom price.

Fourth, God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement (25-31).

Look at verse 25a. "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood." Although justification has been given to us freely by God's grace, it was very expensive to God. God had to sacrifice his one and only Son Jesus Christ to pay the demand of sin. It was the only way; there was no other way. Leviticus 17:11 says, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." Hebrews 9:22 says, "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." The price of sin is lifeblood; nothing less. John the Baptist understood the deep meaning of Jesus' coming and said in John 1:29, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:7b, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed." The power of Christ's sacrifice is partially explained in Hebrews 9:26b. It says, "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." Christ's sacrifice, once for all, has done away with sin.

The blood of Jesus has great power. Hebrews 9:14 says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God." The blood of Jesus can cleanse our consciences completely. No matter how sinful we may be, the blood of Jesus cleanses us to the degree that we can be accepted in the presence of the holy God. Not only so, but we can also serve the living God. As Luke 1:74,75 says, "...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days." The blood of Jesus empowers us to live as holy children of God every day.

God accomplished his work of redemption without compromising his own righteous character. Look at 3:25b,26. "He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." God is not like Buddha. God did not just "forget about" man's sins in making the way of righteousness for us. Rather, God punished every sin without missing one. God did so when he punished Jesus on the cross.

Verse 25 contains the word "forbearance." According to God's just character, he had to punish sinners as their sins were committed. But God did not do so. Instead, he restrained himself and waited for the moment of Jesus' crucifixion. Then at the cross, he punished sin to the full measure. In this way God remained the just and righteous God and also made a way to justify sinners. Praise God! Thank you Jesus!

Verse 27-31 tell us many things. Among them, let's remember two. First, boasting is excluded. We have nothing to boast about because God has done everything for us in Jesus. Second, righteousness that comes by faith does not nullify the law. So we cannot live at random. We must love God. We must honor God as God. We must struggle to live a life that pleases God. Today we learned that God justifies sinners by faith in Christ. May God give you this absolute faith in your heart.