

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part eight

Sunday, November 18th, 2018 - 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #2087

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UNDERSTANDING HOW JUSTIFICATION WORKS - AND HOW IT DOESN'T

Romans 3:21-30 - "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. [27] Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith."

Paul has already taken the better part of three chapters to establish the **universal guilt of all mankind before God (1:1-3:20)**. We really need to let this sink in. This is not the way the gospel has come to be presented by most of today's church. But Paul feels it is absolutely essential to labor over the **"first half"** of the gospel before running to the **"second half."** The whole human race stands in desperate need. We are all, says Paul, **guilty, without excuse**, and not one of us can **produce his deliverance** by his moral effort or works.

Remember, our problem runs much deeper than the need for moral resolve. We need more than pious instruction on how to be better people. We need much more than a new ideology or philosophy. A better moral code won't help. The depth of our situation, in terms of its desperateness, lies in the fact that we are in deep, eternal trouble with the real God who is actually there. Paul says this is more than just religious prattering. He has already spelled our trouble out clearly in **1:18** - **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness...."**

Our problem isn't just our **sin**. Sin wouldn't **be** a problem if God weren't absolutely holy and just. Our problem is **God**. Our problem isn't that there is war and there should be peace. It isn't that we are cruel and we should be kind. It isn't that we hate and we should be more loving. Again, our problem is with **God**.

Paul repeats this over and over in the New Testament - **Ephesians 2:1-3** - **"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— [3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."**

Notice, this is the problem of **all mankind**. We have no bigger problem. And we can do nothing to fix this - absolutely nothing. It's important to take note of the way Paul keeps coming back to this problem. He can't let it go. He knows the gospel can't be appreciated properly until our plight is taken fully in account.

Now Paul proceeds to set forth **God's solution - the plan of Salvation** - for this lost planet. Paul will break this down into three segments. First, this week, we'll study **justification announced (3:21-30)**. Then, next week, we'll study **justification illustrated (3:31-4:25)**. Finally, in three weeks, we'll study the **privileges of justification (5:1-21)**.

JUSTIFICATION ANNOUNCED:

- 1) **THE DECLARATION OF THE DAWNING OF GOD'S DELIVERANCE FOR MANKIND - Romans 3:21-22** - "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22] the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction...."

Paul intends his readers to mark the total contrast between the opening words in **verse 21** and the closing words of **verse 20**. Verse twenty spells out the problem - "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." This is mankind's problem with the law of God. No one will find salvation through keeping it. The law, says Paul, far from bringing **deliverance** from sin, actually increases our **awareness** of sin's presence.

But there is a huge shift in **verse 21** - "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law**, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...." What God is doing in His delivering work on our behalf, He is doing "**apart from the law**." So **verse 20** describes our peril **with** the law and **verse 21** reveals God's deliverance **apart** from the law.

But there's something else in **verse 21** - "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law**, **although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it....**" Though God is delivering mankind through faith, apart from the law, He is not abandoning His original plan or reversing Himself in any way. Paul makes it clear that this delivering act of God apart from the law was **always** in God's plan. In fact, it was announced **within the law itself**. The **Law** and the **Prophets** both gave advance notice of God's great redeeming work in Christ.

For those who are careful enough to see it, Paul already gave notice of this same truth way back in his introduction to this letter - **Romans 1:1-2** - "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] **which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures....**"

- 2) **PAUL KEEPS RETURNING TO THE "FIRST HALF" OF THE GOSPEL - Romans 2:22-23** - "....the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...."

It is simply amazing to me that, right after introducing the subject of salvation "**through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe**" (3:22), Paul can't help but back up again into the "**first half**" of the gospel. He has spent three chapters shattering any hope of self-deliverance by moral reform or religious good works and yet he immediately goes right back to it again.

We need to **know deeply** why Paul does this. It's not because he has a negative self image or a dower personality. Paul knows something better than most of us. He knows if the **devout Jew** or the **careless professing Christian** comes thinking God will accept him or her because of the keeping of certain religious instructions or the preserving of some religious heritage, or the **Christian Scientist** comes thinking he will be accepted just by thinking the right thoughts in his mind, or the **Roman Catholic** comes thinking he will obtain pardon through the purifying effects of purgatory - if any of these situations is presented as a passport to God - there is no hope for salvation.

Paul reminds us that the only proper starting place in being justified is the open admission of a problem with no religious solution. Also, notice the way Paul establishes **personal guilt** in this verse. It's not just that we are **all born in sin**, or are somehow labeled "**sinners**." Rather, "**all have sinned**".

3) **WHY REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST IS SO ESSENTIAL - Romans 3:24 - “...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”**

This verse follows naturally from Paul's conclusion that **all** have sinned and **all** continually (present tense) fall short of God's required glory. Because of this, nothing short of **redemption (24)** will help. On the basis of mankind's rejection of the general revelation of God in nature, our failure to live up to the moral pronouncements we impose on others, and our disobedience to the written revelation of God's will in His specific commandments (1:18-2:24) - on the basis of **all** these failures - there is no **moral guide** or **teaching** that can help us. We need the **“redemption that is in Christ Jesus”(3:24).**

In **verse 24** Paul says we are justified **“freely by his grace.”** This is another way of repeating we are justified **“apart from the law”**(3:21). But just because justification is free to **us**, it is not free to **God**. In fact, there is a sense in which God never just **forgives** sin. He can't just freely, totally forgive sin **ever** in the sense of simply closing His eyes to it and not counting it as sinful.

This is important. With God **every sin is always fully punished**. This is what Paul means in saying our redemption is free **“in Christ Jesus”(3:24)**. This means God has **no redeeming grace to offer outside of Christ Jesus**. This further explains why the Jew (the person **with** the law of God) is just as needy of the gospel of Christ Jesus as the Greek (the person **without** the special revelation of God's law). Both need the redemption that comes exclusively in Christ Jesus because both sin.

4) **PAUL TURNS THE LENS AROUND TO EXAMINE THE EFFECT OF REDEMPTION ON GOD - Romans 3:25-26 - “...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”**

The key to these verses is found in the **time** words. Take note of **“former sins”(25)**, and **“the present time”(26)**. The thought here is God establishes His own **moral credibility** through Christ's redemptive death on the cross. God is seen to be **just** in His punishment of sin in a way that could be missed in the era before Christ came.

But we need to be careful here. **Verses 25-26** are very tricky. When Paul says God **“passed over former sins”(25)** he **doesn't** mean God didn't **judge** sinners in the Old Testament. We **know** God judged sinners before Christ. Think of Adam and Eve in the garden. Think of Noah and the flood. Think of Sodom and Gomorrah. Think of any number of a host of Old Testament stories bearing out God's wrath against sinners. So what can Paul possibly mean in these words, **“...in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins”(25)?**

What he means is God passed over judging **sin** before Christ. It's not that God didn't judge **sinners**, but He didn't deal with **sin**. **People** may have suffered for their actions, but what about the **sin** itself? What was God **doing** about sin? How was He dealing with it? What was His plan beyond merely wrapping the knuckles of sinners? How was He going to **restore His creation?** How was He going to make things right again?

And, most importantly of all, how was He going to **save** these sinners? Was there nothing more to be done other than punishing them over and over and leaving them in their same sinful condition? **This** is what Paul addresses in **verses 25-26**.

The two main thoughts in **25-26** are these:

First, in Christ God deals with the sins committed before Christ came in the flesh. In fact, it was only on the

assumption that Christ would one day come and die that the sins committed beforehand could be held in abeyance, temporarily “covered” by sacrifices that couldn’t possibly do a thing to atone - **Hebrews 10:4** - **“For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”**

Second, God’s justifying work in Christ is secure and certain for those who partake of it in faith. This is the point Paul makes in **verse 26** - **“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”** Jewish theology places the time of the pronouncement of justification at the **last judgment**. This is when all deeds are accounted and the final verdict made.

Paul takes a different track entirely, and it’s precious beyond telling. Paul says that **in Christ** God has already **made** His final pronouncement regarding my justification. God has fully punished and atoned for my sin in Christ Jesus. In other words, my salvation is as fully certain **now** as if the final judgment has **already taken place**. God has made His final judgment on my sin **now** - **“at the present time (26)** - in Christ Jesus. The final future judgment has reached backward into the present time and found its conclusion in Christ’s death and resurrection. Those who stand in faith are **already dealt with** in Christ Jesus!

- 5) **BOASTING IS EXCLUDED BECAUSE ALL ARE SAVED, NOT BY WORKS, BUT BY FAITH** - **Romans 3:27-30** - **“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”**

As Paul closes this chapter he leaves man once again **silent before God (27)**. Paul has mentioned this earlier in **3:19** - **“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”** That first silence is the silence of **guilt** - universal, unarguable guilt. The silence of **verse 27** is the silence of **humility and awe**. The first is the silence of the **condemned**. The second is the silence of the **redeemed**. Boasting is replaced by **humility and thankfulness**.

Boasting is excluded because God’s deliverance of mankind is one **He** produces. Christ (this **must** be remembered) doesn’t enter the scene as some **third party**, saving mankind from a grudging, cruel God. God **initiates** our salvation. God, says Paul, was **in Christ** reconciling the world unto Himself. **God the son willingly lays down His own life in love** - **“No one takes my life from me!”** Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd who **lays down his life for the sheep.**

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. In heathen religions people **make offerings** to their gods to try to win their approval and pardon. But in the gospel, **the Triune God** is the one who does the offering. **He offers His very best** to purchase our redemption from sin and death. Religion is man doing his best for God. The gospel is God giving His best for man. No wonder Paul separated the gospel from all other possibilities and said it alone had the power of God in it!