

Justified by Jesus

“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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. 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...” Romans 3:19-26

The doctrine of justification by faith has historically been one of the most important and disputed issues in the church, and it is no different today. Martin Luther said that this is the issue by which the church stands or falls.

God is a Righteous Judge

Scripture portrays God as a just judge ruling on a throne over his creation (Psalm 7:11, 50:6, 96:13; Is. 41:1; 2 Timothy 4:8). His law comes directly from him as a personal expression of his holy character (Ex. 20:1-17). In the Old Testament, it is primarily referred to as torah which is used in connection to God over 200 times (e.g. “the law of your God” Hos. 4:6), but also mentioned hundreds of other times as statutes, judgments, and testimonies. Because God’s law expresses who he is, David could say “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:97).

We are Guilty

All people know God’s law whether they have heard of the Hebrew torah or not, and all have sinned against it (Rom. 2:12, 3:19). We can’t even live up to our own standards much less God’s. While we might minimize the extent of our sin, Scripture gives us a more objective picture (Rom. 1:29-32, 8:7; Eph. 2:1-2; Jn. 8:42-4). And rather than take bribes or grade on a curve, God is a righteous judge who must condemn the guilty (Jms. 2:10; Rom. 3:20). The problem occurs when God, the just judge, wants to acquit the guilty and remain just and consistent with his own commandments (Ex. 23:7; Dt. 25:1-2; Prov. 17:15). How can he do it?

God’s Righteousness and Ours

Paul says that now, apart from the “law and prophets,” though promised by them, God’s righteousness through Jesus has come to everyone who believes (Rom. 3:21-22). The judge has come off the throne, identified with the guilty, and himself taken their punishment. Jesus was put forward as the propitiation of God’s wrath in order that we might be justified by grace through faith (Rom. 3:24-26). As a judge, he was overlooking the guilt of sinners until such a time when he would justify them, remaining just and becoming the justifier. When can also look at the broad scope of “righteousness” in the Bible to see what else is involved in our justification. In Protestant theology this has often been overlooked, and although none of it contradicts the limited forensic definition of justification as an act of God’s free grace whereby he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight based solely on the righteousness of Christ and received by faith alone, it does enhance our understanding of what Paul is talking about.

In Hebrew and Greek, “justification” and “justify” are based on the same root words as “righteousness” and “righteous.” Although justification begins in a judicial or forensic setting, it doesn’t end there because when Yahweh judges, he isn’t simply declaring from a bench. God is a judge more in the sense of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and Deborah—or rather these judges are like him—judges who rise up, act, use jawbones, and tear down Philistine temples in order to deliver and put things to right. We also see “righteousness” used as a term that describes covenantal loyalty.

- When anyone sins against his neighbor, and is forced to take an oath, and comes *and* takes an oath before Your altar in this temple, then hear in heaven, and act, and judge Your servants, condemning the wicked, bringing his way on his head, and justifying the righteous by giving him according to his righteousness. 1 Kings 8:31-32
- Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king’s son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice. He will bring justice to the poor of the people; he will save the children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressor. Ps. 72:1-2, 4
- Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, and according to my integrity within me. Ps. 7:8
- Vindicate me, O LORD my God, according to Your righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me. Ps. 35:24
- No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue *which* rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This *is* the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness *is* from Me,” says the LORD. Is. 54:17

In Romans 3:20, Paul concludes his condemnation of Jews and Gentiles by alluding to Psalm 143:2: “And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in your sight not man living is righteous.” David prays for relief from enemies and deliverance, appealing only to the righteousness of God his loving-kindness in covenant with David (v12). It’s likely that in Romans 3:20-21, Paul is talking about God’s faithfulness to the covenant, his righteousness in keeping his promises in the law and prophets to make atonement and justify his people. The problem of the condemned before the just judge comes to a head, a new Adam, in Jesus who lives a perfect life and dies a sacrificial death in place of the guilty. The resurrection of Jesus was God’s verdict and deliverance as judge that Jesus “not guilty.” Jesus was declared to be God’s son in his resurrection (Rom. 1:4) where he was also justified in the Spirit. And so our enemies of Satan, sin and death were definitively dealt with at the cross and pronounced defeated at the resurrection. The grave could not hold Jesus, our justification and our righteousness, and we will rise one day as well, vindicated over all our enemies.