

## Justified by Faith in Jesus

Lesson for May 5, 2024

### Unit III: Standing in the Faith

#### Adult Topic: No Need to Boast

**Background Scripture:** Romans 3:21-30

**Printed Text:** Romans 3:21-30

**Key verse:** “*There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” (Romans 3:22b-24, NIV)

“The question is asked: How can justification take place without the works of the law, even though James says: ‘Faith without works is dead’? In answer, the apostle distinguishes between the law and faith, the letter and grace. The ‘works of the law’ are works done without faith and grace, by the law, which forces them to be done through fear or the enticing promise of temporal advantages. But ‘works of faith’ are those done in the spirit of liberty, purely out of love to God. And they can be done only by those who are justified by faith.

*Martin Luther*

#### Key Terms

- 1. Atonement** (verse 25) – The reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. God has provided a way for humankind to come back into harmonious relation with him, is everywhere apparent in Scripture.
- 2. Boasting** (verse 27) – A statement expressing excessive pride in oneself; speak of oneself with excessive pride.
- 3. Justified** (verse 24) – Having or shown to have a just, right, or reasonable basis. Justification is the declaring of a person to be just or righteous. It is a legal term signifying acquittal.
- 4. Righteousness** (verse 21) – God the Father is righteous (just); Jesus Christ his Son is the Righteous (Just) One; the Father through the Son and in the Spirit gives the gift of righteousness (justice) to repentant sinners for salvation; such believing sinners are declared righteous (just) by the Father through the Son, are made righteous (just) by the Holy Spirit working in them, and will be wholly righteous (just) in the age to come. They are and will be righteous because they are in a covenant relation with the living God, who is the God of all grace and mercy and who will bring to completion what he has begun in them by declaring them righteous for Christ's sake.

## Lesson Background

Paul wrote to Christians living in Rome who were primarily Gentiles. They met in house churches, practicing their faith as a minority in a pagan culture of many deities as well as the cult of emperor worship. These believers were likely well educated, in comparison with some of Paul's other letter recipients.

Romans 3 begins with a question-and-answer session, as if between Paul and an imagined opponent. Paul poses questions, much like those, one would expect, from someone taking issue with what Paul wrote in Romans chapter 2. This opponent asks what advantage there is to being a Jew, if the law can't keep individual Jewish people from facing God's judgment for their sin. Paul insists there is an advantage to Israel, as a nation, in that they have been given the "oracles"—the Word—of God. He then shows that God remains faithful to Israel in spite of her faithlessness. In fact, Israel's unrighteousness only serves to further prove God's righteousness. That does not mean, of course, that God wishes for people to sin more and more to make Him look better (Romans 3:1–8).

Next, Paul's shadow questioner asks if Jews are better off than Gentiles. This time, Paul says no. Every single person, Jew, and Gentile is under sin. Having the law doesn't change that. Paul strings together a series of quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures to show that God's Word has always taught that all humans are sinful. He begins with "none is righteous, no, not one" from Psalm 14:1. Then he quotes several verses to show how humans have always used our bodies—our throats, tongues, lips, feet, and eyes—to express our sinfulness. Then Paul delivers his most damning and conclusive sentence, yet: No human being will be justified in God's sight by following the works of the law. The law brings knowledge of sin but no hope of salvation (Romans 3:9–20).

Finally, Paul turns to the point of his letter to the Christians in Rome. The law can never justify us, but Paul reveals that there is a way to be declared righteous in the eyes of God apart from the law.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. There's Only One Way (Romans 3:21-26)

**But now:** These words provide the most glorious transition from the judgment of Romans 3:20 to the justification of Romans 3:21.

**But now** speaks of the newness of God's work in Jesus Christ – it really is a *New Covenant*. **Being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets** reminds us that there is still continuity with God's work in former times.

**Apart from the law:** The law cannot save us, but God reveals a **righteousness** that will save us, *apart from the law*. This is the essence of God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is a salvation that is offered **apart from the law**, apart from our own earning and deserving, apart from our own merits.

**Being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets:** This **righteousness** is not a novelty. Paul didn't "invent" it. It was predicted long ago, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. The Old Testament said this righteousness was coming.

**Apart from the law:** It isn't that the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the Old Testament, but that it is revealed apart from the *principle* of law. It is *apart* from a legal relationship to God, based on the idea of earning and deserving merit before Him.

God's righteousness is not offered to us as something to take up the slack between our ability to keep the law and God's perfect standard. It is not given to *supplement* our own righteousness; it is given completely *apart* from our own attempted righteousness.

**To all and on all who believe:** In Romans 3:21, Paul told us how this righteousness *does not* come. It *does not* come through the deeds of the law, it is *apart from the law*. Now Paul tells us how this saving righteousness *does* come. It is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe.

**Through faith in Jesus Christ:** The righteousness of God is not ours *by* faith; it is ours **through faith**. We do not *earn* righteousness *by our faith*. We *receive* righteousness *through faith in Jesus Christ*.

**Through faith** "points to the fact that faith is not a merit, earning salvation. It is no more than the means *through* which the gift is given." (Morris)

"But faith is not 'trusting' or 'expecting' God to do something, but relying on His testimony concerning the person of Christ as His Son, and the work of Christ for us on the cross... *After saving faith, the life of trust begins*... trust is always looking forward to what God will do; but faith sees that what God says has been done, and believes God's Word, having the conviction that it is true, and true for ourselves." (Newell)

**For there is no difference:** There is no other way to obtain this righteousness. This righteousness is not *earned* through obedience to the law; it is a *received* righteousness, gained through faith in Jesus Christ.

**Being justified:** Paul develops his teaching about salvation around three themes.

- *Justification* is an image from the court of law.
- *Redemption* is an image from the slave market.
- *Propitiation* is an image from the world of religion, appeasing God through sacrifice.

*Justification* solves the problem of man's *guilt* before a righteous Judge. *Redemption* solves the problem of man's *slavery* to sin, the world, and the devil. *Propitiation* solves the problem of offending our Creator.

**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God:** This universal statement is answered by a universal offer to be *justified freely by His grace*. It is open to everyone who will believe.

Morris, quoting Moule: “The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of it; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they.” Everyone falls short, but everyone can be *justified freely by His grace*.

**Fall short of the glory of God:** It’s impossible to describe every way we fall short, but here are four important ways man falls *short of the glory of God*.

- We fail to give God the glory due Him, in our words, thoughts and actions.
- We fail to qualify for, and thereby reject the glory and reward that God gives faithful servants.
- We fail to properly reflect God’s glory by refusing to be conformed into His image.
- We fail to obtain the final glory God will bestow on His people at the end of all history.

**Justified freely by His grace:** Being in such a sinful state, the only way we can be justified is to be justified freely. We can’t purchase it with our good works at all. If it isn’t made free to us, we can’t have it all. So, we are justified freely by His *grace* – His unmerited favor, given to us without regard to what we deserve. It is a giving motivated purely by the giver, and motivated by nothing in the one who receives.

**Freely** is the ancient Greek word *dorean*. The way this word is used in other New Testament passages helps us understand the word. Matthew 10:8 (*Freely you have received, freely give*) and Revelation 22:17 (*And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely*) show that the word means truly *free*, not just “cheap” or “discounted.” Perhaps the most striking use of the ancient Greek word *dorean* is in John 15:25: *They hated me without a cause (dorean)*. Even as there was *nothing* in Jesus deserving of man’s hatred, so there is *nothing* in us deserving of justification – all the reasons are in God.

**Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:** Paul’s gospel centers squarely in Christ Jesus. Salvation is possible because of the **redemption** found in Him. God *cannot* give us His righteousness apart from Jesus Christ.

**Redemption:** This has the idea of *buying back* something, and involves *cost*. However, God pays the cost and so we are **justified freely**.

The word translated **redemption** had its origin describing the release of prisoners of war on payment of a price and was known as the “ransom.” As time went on, it was extended to include the freeing of slaves, again by the payment of a price.

The idea of **redemption** means that Jesus *bought* us; therefore, we belong to Him. Paul expressed this thought in another letter: *For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s* (1 Corinthians 6:20).

**Whom God set forth as a propitiation:** Jesus, by His death (by His blood) was a *propitiation* (substitute sacrifice) for us. As He was judged in our place, the Father could demonstrate His righteousness in judgment against sin, while sparing those who deserved the judgment.

Wuest on *propitiation*: “The word in its classical form was used of the act of appeasing the Greek gods by a sacrifice... in other words, the sacrifice was offered to buy off the anger of the god.”

The NIV translates propitiation as *sacrifice of atonement*; the Living Bible has: *to take the punishment for our sins*.

**A propitiation:** The ancient Greek word for **propitiation** (*hilasterion*) is also used in the Septuagint for the *mercy seat*, the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant, upon which sacrificial blood was sprinkled as an atonement for sin. While it might be said that this passage means “Jesus is our mercy seat,” it probably has the more straightforward idea of propitiation – a substitute sacrifice.

At the same time, the “mercy seat” idea should not be neglected as an illustration of propitiation. Inside the Ark of the Covenant was the evidence of man’s great sin: the tablets of law; the manna received ungratefully; the budded rod of Aaron, showing man’s rejection of God’s leadership. Upon the Ark of the Covenant were the symbols of the holy presence of the enthroned God in the beautiful gold cherubim. In between the two stood the mercy seat, and as sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), God’s wrath was averted because a substitute had been slain on behalf of sinners coming by faith. We really can say that Jesus is our “mercy seat,” standing between guilty sinners and the holiness of God.

**Whom God set forth as a propitiation:** This shows that Jesus did not somehow appease a reluctant, unwilling Father to hold back His wrath. Instead, it was God the Father who initiated the propitiation: whom God set forth.

**Passed over the sins:** God, in His forbearance, had passed over the sins of those Old Testament saints who trusted in the coming Messiah. At the cross, those sins were no longer passed over, they were *paid for*.

The idea is that through the animal sacrifice of the Old Testament, those who looked in faith to the coming Messiah had their sins “covered” by a sort of an “IOU” or promissory note. That temporary covering was redeemed for full payment at the cross.

The work of Jesus on the cross freed God from the charge that He lightly passed over sin committed before the cross. Those sins were passed over for a time but they were finally *paid for*.

**That He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus:** At the cross, God demonstrated His righteousness by offering man *justification* (a legal verdict of “not guilty”), while remaining completely just (because the righteous penalty of sin had been paid at the cross).

It’s easy to see how someone could be only *just* – simply send every guilty sinner to hell, as a just judge would do. It’s easy to see how someone could only be the justifier – simply tell every guilty sinner, “I declare a pardon. You are all declared ‘not guilty.’” But only God could find a way to be *both* just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

“Here we learn that God designed to give the most *evident displays* of both his *justice* and *mercy*. Of his *justice*, in requiring a *sacrifice*, and absolutely refusing to give salvation to a lost world in any other way; and of his *mercy*, in *providing* THE sacrifice which his justice required.” (Clarke)

## II. Nothing to Boast About (Romans 3:27-30)

**Where is boasting then?** It shouldn't be anywhere. Because we are **justified freely by His grace**, there is no room for self-congratulation or credit.

**By what law?** Boasting and pride are not **excluded** because there is some specific passage in the law against them. Instead, pride is excluded because it is completely incompatible with the salvation that is freely ours through faith. Boasting is excluded by the law of faith.

**By the law of faith:** No room for boasting! This is why the natural man *hates* being justified freely by His grace. Grace absolutely refuses to recognize his (imagined) merits and gives no place to his pride whatsoever.

**Justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law:** It isn't that we are **justified by faith** *plus* whatever **deeds of the law** we can do. We are **justified by faith alone, apart from the deeds of the law**. “Since all *works of law* are barred out, *faith* alone is left.

**Apart from the deeds of the law:** Doesn't James contradict this in passages like James 2:14-26? How can we say that it is faith *alone* that saves, apart from the deeds of the law?

It is true faith alone saves, but true faith, saving faith, has a distinct character. It is not just agreeing with certain facts, but it is directing the mind and will in agreement with God. The whole purpose of the book of James is to describe the character of this saving faith.

Calvin explains: “What James says, that man is not justified by faith alone, but also by works, does not at all militate against the preceding view of justification by faith alone. The reconciling of the two views depends chiefly on the drift of the argument pursued by James. For the question with him is not, how men attain righteousness before God, but how they prove it to others that they are justified; for his object was to confute hypocrites, who vainly boasted that they had faith... James meant no more than that man is not made or proved to be just by a feigned or dead faith, and that he must prove his righteousness by his works.”

**Yes, of the Gentiles also:** This righteousness is offered to both Jew and Gentile. The universal character of the offer is demonstrated by a simple fact: Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Of course He is. If there is only one God, then God is **God of the Gentiles** as much as He is God of the Jews. It's just up to the Gentiles to *recognize* Him as God.

**There is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith:** Not only is this righteousness *available* to both Jew and Gentile, it is also *received the same way* by both Jew and Gentile. Since one God justifies both Jew and Gentile, He justifies them in the same way: *by faith... through faith*.

## Lesson Summary

In this week's lesson we find that the law can never justify us, but Paul reveals that there is a way to be declared righteous in the eyes of God apart from the law. It is available through faith in Christ for all who believe. True, all have sinned and fall short of being able to participate in God's glory. But we can be justified—declared righteous before God—through God's grace as a gift. This is something we could never earn. Salvation is possible through the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood when He died on the cross to pay for our sin. God is the one who put Christ forward to be sacrificed in this way to show His own righteousness. Our sin must be paid for. God's just anger must be satisfied, and it was satisfied in Christ's death. That allowed God to become not the executioner but the justifier of everyone who has faith in Jesus. Here are some key lessons that can be drawn from this passage:

1. **Justification by faith:** The passage emphasizes that people are justified (made right) with God not by their own works or adherence to the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. This highlights the central belief of Christianity that salvation is a gift from God, received through faith, rather than something earned through human effort.
2. **Universal need for salvation:** All people, regardless of their background or circumstances, are in need of salvation. The passage states that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), highlighting the universal human condition of sinfulness.
3. **Grace and mercy:** Paul emphasizes the grace and mercy of God in providing salvation. It describes Jesus as the one who "redeemed us by paying the price" (Romans 3:24), highlighting the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death on the cross as the means of salvation.
4. **Unity in Christ:** Justification is available to all people, regardless of their background. The lesson shows that there is "no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Romans 3:22), highlighting the inclusive nature of God's salvation through Christ.
5. **Exclusion of boasting:** The passage emphasizes that because salvation is by faith, there is no room for boasting in one's own efforts or achievements. It states that justification is "by faith, apart from the works of the law" (Romans 3:28), emphasizing that salvation is a gift from God rather than something earned through human merit.