

The Doctrine Of Justification

Romans 3:20-28

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In Romans 3:20-28, Paul says, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified...”—there’s our word—“...in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference...”—that is, between Jew and Gentile—“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified...”—there’s our word again—“...freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man...”—or “person”—“...is justified...”—there’s our word—“...by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” So Paul opens with and closes with the statement that you can’t be justified by the deeds of the law.

Now I want to look at the essential doctrine of justification. I say “essential,” because this is Christianity. If you are wrong about this doctrine, then you are wrong about salvation and about the Christian Gospel. It is absolutely central and essential to Christianity. All the cults and false religions are wrong about this doctrine of justification by faith. This doctrine of justification answers the important question of how God saves sinners.

And how God saves sinners is simple but not simplistic. It is simple in that John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes...”—that’s faith—“...in Him...”—that is, “Christ”—“...should not perish but have everlasting life.” That’s it. If you just understand John 3:16, you understand how God saves sinners.

Who can explain how a holy, righteous God can justify an unholy, unrighteous man? Paul does, and it takes him all of the book of Romans to answer this question. So we are going to lift out just a small section of Romans to answer this question.

In Romans 1:16-17, Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation...”—there it is—“...for everyone who believes...”—there is it—“...for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” And the rest of Romans is an opening up of these verses.

How does God save fallen mankind? Let me give you a summary of what we will go through in the text. God does three things: He saves us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. This was the cry of the Protestant Reformation: God saves sinners by grace, through

faith, in Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, called Romans 3:20-28 the chief point and the very central place of the epistle of Romans and of the whole Bible.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, a great preacher and pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, spent 10 years preaching phrase-by-phrase through the book of Romans on Sunday mornings from his pulpit. Think of that! He said, "These verses are the most important in the Bible." That's quite a statement. They are the most important in the Bible, because they take this very complex, theological thought of how God saves sinners and makes it very clear.

Now I want to give you seven facets or facts about justification. How does God justify the unjust? Number one, justification is totally apart and separate from the deeds of the law. Verse 20 begins, "Therefore...." This word takes you back to Romans 3:10-19, where these verses show the total depravity of man; how mankind is fallen. Then Paul comes to verse 19 where he says, "...that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."

When Adam fell, as the federal head, he brought sin, death and condemnation on the whole, human race. In Ephesians 2:1 we see that we "were dead in trespasses and sins." We're dead, depraved and doomed. We are all dead in sin and thus separated from God.

How then does God save us and still maintain His righteousness? Paul first tells us how we cannot be justified, in verse 20, which is our first point. "By the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Paul opens with his conclusion, and then in verse 28, he closes, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." So he opens, in verse 20—"By the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight"—and closes, in verse 28, with the same summary statement: no one can be justified by keeping the law.

What does the word "justify" mean? Paul uses this word in verses 20, 24, 26 and 28. The word "justification" is defined as "the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner to be righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the Cross." This is a great breakdown or definition of the word "justification" as it is used theologically and doctrinally in the Bible.

"Justification" is a legal or forensic term. It belongs to the law courts. As the opposite of "condemnation," it is the pronouncement of a judge that a person is righteous. In the courtroom, when a judge makes the pronouncement, "I declare you righteous," and the accused is acquitted, he is justified by the courts.

Notice that the justification in our text is an act of God. God alone can justify; we cannot justify ourselves. Thus it is an act and not a process. Justification happens instantaneously the moment the believing sinner puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ and is declared righteous. And a person will not get more righteous in years to come; it is complete, positional righteousness that doesn't change.

All Christians share equally in the same righteousness that is in Christ. But God declaring the

sinner positionally righteous doesn't mean the sinner won't sin; that is a process we go through called "sanctification," to become more Christ-like. Rather, this is a declaration about our position in Christ, that we are declared righteous.

And who is declared righteous? The believing sinner. Their position is "in Christ." In Romans 8:1, it says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

There is a basis for God justifying us, and the basis is "the finished work of Christ on the Cross." That's the foundation by which God can declare the believing sinner righteous. The law says "behave," but the Gospel says "believe." The law says "do," but the Gospel says "done."

I want you to notice the purpose of the law given in verse 20. Paul says, "By the deeds of the law no flesh..."—that's "no human being"; this speaks of man's weakness and sin—"...be justified..."—or "declared righteous"—"...in His sight..."—why?—"...for by the law is the knowledge of sin." So the purpose of the law isn't to save you; it's to convict you and convince you of your need of a Savior, because you're a sinner. It's to drive you to Jesus Christ. It won't cleanse you, but it's to convict you.

It's like looking in a mirror. It tells the truth about you; it shows your every flaw. The law is like a mirror. There is no mirror that will help you or fix you. When your hair is all messed up, looking in a mirror won't change how you look. The only thing the mirror does is reveal your true condition. To change yourself, you have to do something to get your act together.

The law is also like an old-style thermometer that you put under your tongue. That thermometer tells you if you have a temperature. It won't take away the fever; it just shows you that you have a fever. So it is with the law: it doesn't forgive your sin or justify you. It just tells you that you're a sinner in need of a Savior.

The word "forgiveness" means that God takes away our sin; He carries it away. And the word "justify" means that God gives us righteousness. It's not enough for God to just take away our sin; that just brings us back to zero, starting from scratch. So God must also impart His righteousness to us. But since we're sinners, fallen mankind—dead, depraved and doomed—how can we be righteous before a holy God? The answer is that God Himself must impart to us new life. He must give to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and we must be declared righteous before Him, a holy God.

Notice verse 21: "But now...." So before this we had the knowledge of our sin through the law. "But now the righteousness of God..."—in the Greek it's "a righteousness that comes from God"—"...apart from the law..."—there is no need of the law—"...is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

This phrase "the Law and the Prophets" is a description of the entire Old Testament. If the Jews wanted to describe the Old Testament, they would say, "the Law and the Prophets." Those are the two categories of the Old Testament. Genesis 3:15 says that the Seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. That is a Messianic prophecy in the Law; that God would send

the Messiah to die and save us from our sins. From the Prophets you can take Isaiah 53:5: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed."

When Jesus rose from the dead and traveled on the road to Emmaus with the two disciples, He spoke from the Law and the Prophets to show them that the Messiah was to suffer and die and then be raised from the dead the third day. Throughout the Old Testament we see a picture of this righteousness that is manifested in Romans 3:21. This righteousness was "witnessed by the Law and the Prophets." So even the old covenant, the Old Testament, testifies that a person is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. Thus how are we saved? "Apart from the law."

How does God justify us? Number two, through faith in Jesus Christ. And it's not just faith, not just believing in a god, but specifically faith in Jesus Christ. Verse 22 says, "...even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ." So how do we get God's righteousness? By putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Four times Paul mentions "faith" or belief in this passage: in verse 22, 25, 26 and 28. The only way to be justified is by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith alone is the point; not faith plus works. You can't be justified by works of the law. And that's why we add the word "alone." Some critics of this point say that word "alone" is not in the text. But the words saved "freely by His grace" are, which means "without any merit" or without our good works. We are saved by faith without works—what else is there? So the concept is, alone faith saves in Jesus Christ.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, talking about salvation, it says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." That's a summary of our whole text. We are not saved by good works; we are saved unto good works. Good works is the fruit, not the root. So the Bible is very clear that we are saved by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

Because we are dead in trespasses and sin, some say that God must regenerate or give you new life before you can have faith in order for you to believe in Jesus; you must have your eyes opened spiritually. Some believe this because they take the concept of being dead in sins in a hyper-literal sense, so you can't respond. But the Bible doesn't teach that. The Bible teaches that we are regenerated or reborn by believing in Jesus Christ.

The etymology of the word "dead," when speaking about sin, means to be separated from God. Physical death occurs when my soul and spirit are separated from my physical body. Spiritual death occurs when we are separated from God because of our sins. God gives me new life as a result of me put my faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a few references. In John 20:31, John is giving the purpose statement of his Gospel. He says, "These are written that you may believe..."—there's faith—"...that Jesus is

the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” So believing is what brings life “in His name.”

Then John 3:16 says, “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” God doesn’t give us everlasting life so that we can believe; we get everlasting life, because we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

In Acts 16:31, Paul and Silas were in a Philippian jail and were singing praises at midnight when God sent an earthquake. It was the first “jailhouse rock.” They stayed in the jail and the jailer came in. Paul told the jailer, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here.” Then the jailer asked, “What must I do to be saved?”

That’s an important question. I use that question when a cultist knocks on my door. Then I turn to Acts 16:31. There Paul gave the answer to the jailer’s question: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Paul didn’t say “Behave.” He didn’t say, “Get baptized.” He didn’t say, “Join our church.” He didn’t say, “Get a haircut.” He didn’t say, “You have to perform certain rites or rituals.” Paul just said that if you put your faith, your trust, your belief in Jesus Christ, “you will be saved.” It’s that simple—but not simplistic—so even a child can understand this.

What is “faith”? Faith is not merely an intellectual assent to facts and information. And it’s not faith in God generally. In verse 22, it says it’s “faith in Jesus Christ.” It’s a change of mind and heart, which is the Greek word “metanoia.” It’s being repentant, which is part of faith, changing your mind and saying, “I’m a sinner.” It’s feeling sorrow and repentance in your heart—emotion. Then it’s the surrender of your will, believing and trusting in Jesus Christ. This is what it means to have faith.

We all exercise faith every day in so many ways. You got in your car today, turned the key or pushed the ignition button, in faith expecting your car to start. Sometimes you’re disappointed. So faith is only as good as the object you put your faith in. After your car starts and as you drive along, you come to a signal and take your foot off the accelerator and put your foot on the brake, in faith expecting the car to stop. When you get on an airplane, it takes a lot of faith. Think of the faith you’re putting in those engines, in the mechanics, in the pilot. We put faith in so many people and things.

The first time I ever flew I was going from LA to Hawaii. We were about halfway there, over the Pacific, when the pilot walked by my seat. I was just a teenager, so I thought, Who’s flying this plane?!

Faith is not just intellectual knowledge; it’s basically trust or a commitment. Faith is putting your weight on Jesus Christ. Like the song, it says, “Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to Thy Cross I cling.” It’s believing and trusting in Jesus Christ. This is why when Paul describes the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:4, he said that “He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” It is Christ who is the object of our faith.

In Romans 4:3, Paul goes all the way back into the Old Testament and uses Abraham as an example of salvation by faith in God's promise and not by the law. Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." In Romans 4:1-8, Abraham is saved by faith and not by works; in verses 9-12, he is saved by faith and not by rites; in verses 13-16, Abraham is saved by faith and not by the law; and in verses 17-25, he is saved by faith in God's promise.

Abraham was given a promise by God that he would have a son, and his descendants would be as many as the stars that are in the sky and the sand along the seashore. What did Abraham do? He "believed God"—that's faith. And what did God do? God imputed righteousness to him. That's the Gospel.

God makes a promise, we believe God's promise and God imputes to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Faith is the eye that looks to Him, faith is the hand that receives from Him and faith is the mouth that drinks from Him. We are saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

How does God justify the unjust? Number three, He does it for everyone equally, for Jew and Gentile alike. There isn't a salvation for the Jews and a different salvation for the Gentiles. There's not a salvation for Americans and a different salvation for people in Russia. "There is none righteous, no, not one." Verses 22-23 say, "...to all and on all who believe." There's faith. "For there is no difference..."—that is, between Jew and Gentile—"...for all..."—all of humanity—"...have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

So basically Paul is saying because everyone has sinned, everyone has fallen short, and we all stand in need of this righteousness of God that is given to us by faith in Jesus Christ. As we read in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek," or the Gentile.

The salvation of God, apart from the law, by faith in Jesus Christ, is universal for everyone. The Bible doesn't teach the idea that all paths or roads lead to God. There is only one way to God: that's by grace, through faith, in Christ alone.

How does God justify the unjust? Number four, by His grace. Verse 24 says, "...being justified..."—there's our word, being declared "righteous"—"...freely..."—or "without a cause"—"...by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Every word is important. So the source of our justification is the grace of God.

Only the Bible, only Christianity, teaches that God saves sinners by grace, through faith. All the cults and other religions teach that somehow, some way you must do something to earn, merit or deserve—through rite or rituals, washings or works—salvation. Christianity alone teaches that we are saved by grace. God is love, and His love is manifested toward us in His grace and in His mercy, as seen in the Cross of Christ.

God loves you. And how do you experience His love? By His grace and mercy. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve. It's that simple. God saves you, even though you don't

deserve it. You don't work for it, you don't earn it and you don't merit it. Mercy, on the other hand, is God not giving you what you do deserve. So God is both gracious and merciful. He doesn't condemn us or judge us, but He does save us. The negative is He takes away our sin, but the positive is He declares us righteous, because of His grace and His mercy, as displayed at the Cross.

So salvation, from beginning to end, is the initiative of God by His love, His mercy and His grace. Is it any wonder that John Newton wrote the song, Amazing Grace?

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now I'm found,

Was blind, but now I see."

Salvation is by grace and grace alone; we don't earn it. That's humbling. That excludes boasting; you can't boast. If God saves you by His grace, then all praise and glory and honor goes to God. In Ephesians 1 it talks about how we were chosen by God the Father, redeemed by God the Son and we are sealed and indwelt by God the Holy Spirit at salvation "to the praise of the glory of His grace." So when we get to heaven, there will be no bragging sessions going on. It's all done by the grace of God, from beginning to end. God's grace is amazing.

Number five, God justifies the unjust at great cost to God. This is how God saves sinners. Verses 24-25 say, "...through the redemption..."—that's the cost—"...that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God has passed over the sins that were previously committed"; that's Old Testament. So when God saves us by His grace, it's a free gift for us, but it cost God the life of His own Son on the Cross.

So the source of our justification is God's grace, the means of our justification is faith in Christ, and the grounds for our justification is the Cross of Christ. Our salvation is a free gift of God's grace, but it's not cheap; it cost the life of God's own Son, Jesus Christ.

Some people say, "Grace is too easy! That's too simple; you just can't believe—just believe in God, just trust Jesus and He saves you and forgives you. You have to do something for it!" They call it "cheap grace." But there's nothing cheap about grace. Your salvation is a free gift, but it cost God the life of His only Son. Jesus had to die for us to be forgiven and redeemed.

There are a couple of key words I want to point out: the word "redemption," in verse 24; the word "propitiation," in verse 25; and you could also add the word "blood." What was the cost? It was a redemption, a propitiation.

The word "redemption" means "to buy out of a slave market and set free." It means to buy or

purchase a slave, take him or her out of the slave market and then set the slave free. The purchase price of salvation was the blood of Jesus Christ. Verse 25 says, "by His blood."

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and they came out from bondage during the Exodus, the last plague was the Passover. The Israelites had to put lamb's blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses, so the death angel would pass over their houses where the blood was supplied. Then the Israelites went out from Egypt—they were redeemed—and were set free.

That's a picture of our redemption. We're all slaves to sin, Jesus came and bought us with His blood—He took us out of the slave market of sin—and set us free.

The word "propitiation" is an important word, verse 25. "...God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith." "Propitiation" means "the satisfying of God's holy, righteous wrath."

Jesus not only died on the Cross for sinners; He died on the Cross for the Father, to satisfy the demands of His holy, righteous law. It's not that He was a wrathful, jealous God who needed to be appeased. It was because the law of a holy, righteous God had been violated, and the penalty needed to be paid for that violation. For God to "be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus," He had to have a basis to do that, and that basis was the Cross of Jesus Christ, where the penalty was paid. So the wrath of God was satisfied.

In a sense, God satisfied His own law. He saved us from Himself. His wrath was poured out not on us but on Christ. That satisfied the demands of God's holy, righteous law.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed in agony, in light of the fact He would soon go to the Cross. He prayed, "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done." There were several things in that cup, but one of them was the wrath of God. Jesus was going to have to drink that cup of wrath. That is why Jesus cried on the Cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

So God had to give own His Son to pay the penalty for His own law so He could be righteous in justifying the unrighteous. That's called "propitiation," the death of Jesus Christ for God the Father.

Number six in how God saves the unrighteous is that it is done in perfect justice, verse 26. "...to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness...." So at the Cross, verses 24-25, God displayed, demonstrated or declared His righteousness, "...that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." It was in order for Him to be just in justifying sinners.

So the Cross is the redemption of sinners, a propitiation of God's wrath and a vindication of God's justice and righteousness. How can God, who is holy, righteous and just, forgive sinners, who are guilty and condemned? The answer is the Cross. Jesus was the propitiation for our sins in order for God to be just when He justifies us.

How does God save sinners? Number seven, by excluding boasting, verses 27-28. He saves

them by grace, through faith in Christ. "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." It's pretty clear: He saves us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In the New Testament, there are three metaphors that are used to describe the meaning of justification. Number one is the clothing metaphor. The bible says that we are naked before a holy, righteous God. "All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags." So God gives us the robes of righteousness of Christ to our account to put on. That's justification. We're robed in our filthy rags, we're naked and lost before a holy God, so He gives us the clothing, the righteousness of Christ.

The second metaphor is a banking metaphor in which we are bankrupt and have nothing to commend ourselves to God. So God adds the righteousness of Christ to our account, and it is now ours.

The third metaphor is the courtroom metaphor, that is in our passage, in which we are declared righteous, or we are acquitted by a righteous judge and are free by the righteousness of Christ.

In light of this righteousness, given to us by God, there is no boasting. This is why Jesus gave the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, in Luke 18:9-14. "He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." This describes so many people today. "I do this, so God loves me and will accept me and I'll go to heaven. If I don't do this, God will reject me."

In the parable, Jesus said that there were two men. One was a Pharisee, a religious Jew, and the other was a publican, a despised tax collector. The word "publican" or "tax collector" in the Bible is synonymous with "a sinner." They were corrupt people.

So Jesus said that the Pharisee went to the temple to pray. The Bible says, "The Pharisee stood and prayed this with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men.'" Legalism always gets you comparing yourself with others. "I'm better than him. I'm not perfect, but I'm better than that person, so God will let me in heaven." Then the Pharisee said, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess." He thought he could hear the angels clapping in heaven for him. He said, "Thank God I'm not like this publican over here. I'm a righteous man."

Then the publican, who came to pray, "Would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" Then Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The man who said, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" went home right before God. But the man with the self-confidence and boasting was still far from God.

Paul said in Galatians 6:14, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." And again, in Ephesians 2:8-9, it says, "By grace you have been saved through

faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

How does God save us? By grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Amen.