

“The Grounds of Our Justification: Christ and His Cross (Solus Christus) (Part 2)” –

Romans 3:24-26

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October 18, 2020

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and meet me in Romans 3...

I'm glad to see you all. It's been a challenging time for many of our families. Our church lost some dear people this past week or so, including a couple of her deacons. That's never easy. But I'm so grateful that we can come together and worship. The Lord gives and takes away, but even in times like these we can still bless His name. He is worthy of that. He has been good to us. And when we open His Word and peer into the Gospel it conveys, we get a stabilizing glimpse at why the work of Christ matters and how it addresses the most difficult moments of our lives, including those final moments.

We have a God who has made a way for us to be made right with Him, forgiven of sin and counted as righteous, through faith in Jesus Christ. And because of this we know that we always have a place with God, not because of anything we have done, but because of the sufficiency of Christ's work on our behalf. That gives us hope in any situation. And our text this morning can help us understand why that hope is possible.

The little series we are in right now is an exploration of the doctrine of justification. What do we mean by justification?

“The doctrine of justification concerns God's gracious judicial verdict in advance of the day of judgment, pronouncing guilty sinners—who turn in self-despairing trust to Jesus Christ—forgiven, acquitted of all charges and declared morally upright in God's sight.”¹

That's the definition we have been working with in this series and testing along the way.

Really, when you boil it down though, this series has been a comparison of what James and Paul say on the matter of our justification. When we began a few weeks ago, I suggested to you that James and Paul are not contradictory, but complementary. They believe the same things about our justification in Christ, but they are describing different aspects of that justification. James is more concerned in the letter with the fruit that invariably grows out of our justification, while Paul (in passages like Romans 3) is more concerned with helping us understand the root issues related to our justification. We are going to look more at some of these root issues again this morning.

That said, I'm going to be briefer than usual today because we are going to carve out a little bit of time to consider a ministry that God has been growing up in our church, and Jamie Sanders is going to give us some details on that. So really I am just going to focus on one idea this morning, an idea I left off intentionally last week. We'll get to it in a moment, but let's do the most important thing first and that's look at the text itself.

If you have found your way to Romans 3, let me invite you to jump down to verse 21, where I will start reading in a moment. These are the same verses we have looked at the last couple of weeks. Follow along as I read them once more. This is God's Word...

“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: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom 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. ²⁶It 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.” (Romans 3:21-26)

Two weeks ago we considered what these verses teach us about...

THE SOURCE OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: GOD AND HIS GRACE (*Sola Gratia*)

Last week we reflected on what this text teaches us about....

THE GROUNDS OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: CHRIST AND HIS CROSS (*Solus Christus*)

I want to finish that conversation today. So far we are two points into what this text teaches us about the purpose of Christ and His cross. We've examined what this text teaches us about...

The Redemption of the Cross

And what it communicates about...

The Propitiation of the Cross

If you missed that sermon, you can watch it or read it on our website later this week. But we are going to move on to one final subpoint here, which I'll refer to as...

The Demonstration of the Cross

The cross of Christ was meant as a demonstration. Our passage began, in verse 21, setting the theme of this section—the righteousness of God. Paul is trying to explain how *“the righteousness of God has been manifested”*. After reminding us that our justification is an act of God's grace, through the redemption provided by Christ, whose death propitiated God's wrath, Paul makes explicit again that all of this has to do with the manifestation of *“God's righteousness”*. At the end of verse 25, he says, *“This [i.e., all the accomplishment of Christ in our salvation] was to show God's righteousness”*.

So the cross of Christ teaches us something of the Lord's priorities, the things that matter to Him. And one of those things is to demonstrate His righteousness or justice (remember those words have the same root in Paul's language). As Tim Keller explains,

“God does not set his justice aside; he turns it onto himself. The cross does not represent a compromise between God's wrath and his love; it does not satisfy each halfway. Rather, it satisfies each fully and in the very same action. On the cross, the wrath and love of God were both vindicated, both demonstrated, and both expressed perfectly. They both shine out, and are utterly fulfilled. The cross is a demonstration both of God's justice, and of his justifying love (Romans 3:25–26).”²

That's Paul's point here. But why might God want to show that? Well, Paul suggests that God's saving activity in history could be seen as an injustice, if it is not tethered to the cross of Christ. Look again at verse 25. Paul

says, “*This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins*” (3:25). It’s interesting, isn’t it, that what was controversial in Paul’s day is not what seems controversial to most in our day. Perhaps it’s because we feel more entitled to salvation for one misguided reason or another. But you see, Paul realizes something that many today seem oblivious to.

“The problem is not what we assume today—how could a loving God condemn anyone? That question is easily answered by reading the first three chapters of the Bible, or the first three chapters of Romans. A holy God could condemn the world for its rebellion. The biblical problem is a much more difficult one—how could a holy God maintain his moral integrity and forgive sinners? The answer is by putting forward Christ ‘as a propitiation in his blood.’”³

That’s why Paul is saying that Christ was put forward to vindicate God’s righteousness. Paul understood that, unlike people in our day, some of his contemporaries wondered if God forgiving sinners by His grace was an act that disregarded justice entirely. They didn’t have trouble with the idea that God could condemn a sinner. That’s a modern problem. That’s the influence of humanism. They had trouble understanding how God could forgive a sinner so fully and still be considered just.

Think about what Paul is saying here in the context of his larger argument. If Christ is the one who deals with the sin problem of every believer in history, then what are we to make of God’s saving action toward those who lived and died prior to the cross? Was God acting unrighteous in leaving the sins of those Old Testament believers unpunished? Paul’s answer is a definitive “No!” The Old Testament sacrifices, offered in faith, were temporary place-holders for the true payment for sin that they pointed to—the ultimate sacrifice offered up by Christ on the cross. “God was accepting Abraham, Moses, David and all the Old Testament saints when they repented and trusted in his mercy, but he accepted them on the basis of the future work of Christ.”⁴ As one of my favorite Christian hip hop artists, Shai Linne, put it in a rap,

The cross of Jesus Christ is the nucleus of history
Before the cross, they were saved on credit
After the cross, we’ve been saved on debit⁵

Of course, Paul doesn’t have credit and debit cards in mind when he wrote, since they weren’t in existence yet. But in the modern world it’s hard for me to think of a more clarifying illustration than that. As Andrew David Naselli explains in an article,

“When my vehicle needs more gas, I stop at a gas station and refuel. Rather than walking into the store to pay, I conveniently slide my credit card through the machine at the pump and fill up my gas tank. I do not pay any cash, but I still get gas. How? I get the gas *on credit*. Within a month of filling up my tank, I receive a bill with the account payable to the credit card company. That is when I must pay for what I borrowed on credit. That illustrates how God saved Old Testament believers on credit. Just like I slide my credit card through the machine, they offered sacrifices to God in faith. Just like I get the gas, they received genuine forgiveness of sin. Just like I received a bill for the gas and pay it, Christ received their bill and paid their sin debt in full.”⁶

Do you see? If God forgave them on the basis of Christ’s death that had not yet taken place, then their salvation was a kind of credit until Christ paid their debt in full. For us it’s different. We live after Christ paid for our redemption, so when a sinner trusts in the mercy of God and the blood of Christ for their salvation today there is already atonement money in the bank—the full and sufficient currency of Christ’s own blood—to pay off all their sins. So all believers—before or after the cross—are all saved by grace, through faith, on the basis of Christ’s work. He paid off the debt of sin that every believer in history owed.

Paul wants us to see this because he doesn’t want anyone to accuse God of acting in an unrighteous fashion for saving Old Testament believers as though he were overlooking their sin. Well who would accuse God of acting

unrighteous? Potentially anyone who those Old Testament believers sinned against. They might feel as though God, at least by appearances, was just sweeping the sins of their afflictors under the rug, letting them get away with sin. That wouldn't be righteous. That wouldn't be just. And that's why the cross is so important. The cross demonstrates that God's forbearance—His delay and patience in punishing sin—was not unjust because every sin would eventually be paid for and judged to the full—either in Christ's death in the place of the sinner or in the hell experienced by those who die their sin and unbelief.

So the cross vindicates God's righteousness because it shows conclusively that He does deal with sin. "The passing over of former sins creates such a crisis in the righteousness of heaven that God must kill his Son in order to vindicate his righteousness in the passing over of sin."⁷ The cross shows the victims of sin that God didn't stop caring about justice (righteousness). And if you have ever been the victim of sin, then perhaps you can understand why this vindication of God is a comfort.

Take, for example, the story of David and Bathsheba in the Old Testament.⁸ David is the king in Israel, but instead of being with his soldiers, where he ought to have been, he finds himself walking around on the roof of his palace. He catches sight of a beautiful woman bathing in the neighborhood and has his men get her. David gets what he wants from her because he is the king and he can. Eventually he learns that she has become pregnant with his child. In a coverup attempt, he has her husband, named Uriah, brought back from the frontlines of war and tries to get him to spend the night with his wife so that no one would catch on to David's sin. When that doesn't work, David puts a plan in motion to have Uriah killed discreetly. That does work. At least for a while.

Then one day the prophet Nathan comes before David and the king is exposed. He confesses his sin and cries out in repentance, "*I have sinned against the Lord.*" The prophet Nathan then declares, "*The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die*" (2 Sam. 12:13). His sins of murder, adultery, dishonesty—passed over. That's an illustration of what Paul means in Romans 3:25, when he said that God, "*in his divine forbearance...passed over former sins.*"

Now we, as sinners, may look at that story and find comfort because we identify with David in his guilt and grief over sin. But what if you were Bathsheba's father and you watched all of this go down? "Really?", you might think. "The Lord has taken away his sin? Just like that? This guy assaulted and took advantage of my daughter. This guy murdered my son-in-law. And the Lord is just going to take away his sin? Is that justice? Is that what a righteous judge does?" You see the point? You see the difficulty? Wouldn't we expect a judge like that to be impeached? Yet God isn't and He remains just in all His judgments. Why? That's what Romans 3:25 is about. "He killed his Son to show that he wasn't scorning his glory or the life of Uriah or the sanctity of this woman."⁹

The cross, in part, is meant for every victim of sin who is tempted to feel like God doesn't seem to care about the sins committed in this world. He does care. He does judge. And the cross is meant as a vindication of His righteousness. "Our instinct—that God would compromise His righteousness to simply waive the penalty of the guilty—is right."¹⁰ But that's not what happened here. God the Father put forth God the Son "*as a propitiation*" (3:25) and, thus, "our justification itself is shown to be judicially justified."¹¹ God didn't let sin go unpunished. "On the cross, Christ endured hell, was cursed, and was forsaken precisely because God would not compromise His justice or set aside His own righteous demands."¹²

And so Paul says in verse 26, now looking ahead in time, that the purpose of Christ's work "*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.*" R. C. Sproul teased out the implication of these verses as follows:

"There is no such thing as cheap grace. The gospel is not simply an announcement of pardon. In justification God does not merely decide unilaterally to forgive us our sins. That is the prevailing idea, that what happens in the gospel is that God freely forgives us of sin because He is such a loving, dear,

wonderful God, and it does not disturb Him that we violate everything that is holy. God never negotiates His righteousness. God will never lay aside His holiness to save us. God demands and requires that sin be punished. That is why the cross is the universal symbol of Christianity. Christ had to die because, according to God, the propitiation had to be made; sin had to be punished. Our sin has to be punished.

In the drama of justification, God remains just. He does not set aside His justice. He does not waive His righteousness; he insists upon it. We cannot be justified without righteousness, but the glory of His grace is that His justice is served vicariously by a substitute that He appointed. God's mercy is shown in that what saves us is not our righteousness. It is someone else's. We get in on someone else's coattails—that is grace. That somebody, our Redeemer, is perfectly righteous and has fulfilled the justice of God for us perfectly. That is the glory of justification. God demonstrates that He is both just and justifier. If all He did was maintain His righteousness without extending the imputation of that righteousness to us, He would not be justified. He is both just and justifier, which is the marvel of the gospel."¹³

Amen!

And how do we connect to this work of Christ? How does His work and righteousness get credited to our account? Well, Paul has told us three times in this paragraph—it is through faith.

If you are sitting there thinking that it would be amazing if the wrath of God that Jesus bore on the cross was the very same wrath of God that you deserve for your sin, then behold the beauty of the cross and its salvation because that is what happened there. The sinless One was treated as a sinner in your place so that you wouldn't have to be condemned by God. Trust in Christ alone—*solus Christus*—and your sins will be forgiven and His righteousness credited to your account. That is what He calls for. Not some payment from you. Not some effort on your part. No. He calls you to trust in Him who justifies the ungodly. Paul says that a few verses into the next chapter:

“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...” (Romans 4:5)

Is that you? It can be. Trust in Christ this morning. Confess your sin and need to Him and call upon Him to save you. He will. And He will glorify Himself in making you another trophy of His grace. And that's really good news. That's the beauty of the gospel.

If you want to discuss this further, let's connect after the service. I'll be at this door when you are dismissed. Let's connect. Maybe we could set up a time this week and visit more if needed. I'd be happy to do so. You can also fill out one of those cards at the exits when you leave and drop it in the offering plate at the door. Give us a way to contact you and we will reach out this week.

Now, next Sunday, Lord willing, we are going to explore a new aspect of this text in greater detail:

THE MEANS OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: FAITH AND NOT WORKS (*SOLA FIDE*)

This will be a fitting topic, given that next Sunday is Reformation Sunday. I'll hope you will join us. And bring a friend.

As I mentioned at the beginning, we are going to wrap up a little differently today. We want to highlight a ministry that God has been developing among us related to the foster care system. So we want to show you a video that gives you a little information about a local ministry known as Hope Haven. Then after the video,

Jamie Sanders, one of our secretaries at the church and one of the members of the team that has been working on this ministry is going to share with us what God has been up to and how you can help in the days ahead.

Take a look at this video...

¹ Philip Eveson unpacks this definition in greater detail at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-doctrine-of-justification/>. I have modified his punctuation slightly, without violating his intent, to make the progression more intelligible in American English.

² Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 83-84. Similarly, J. V. Fesko writes: "In Christ's sacrificial work, God reveals His righteousness. Recall, this is one of the chief themes of Paul's epistle to Rome. Paul set forth his thesis at the beginning of his letter when he wrote that in the gospel, 'the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith' (Rom. 1:17). The gospel reveals both the mercy and justice of God, His wrath and His grace. When Christ shed His blood on the cross, God demonstrated to the world that He was just, that He was righteous—He didn't merely write off sin. God punished the sins of His people when Jesus willingly suffered on their behalf. But at the same time, God mercifully granted access to Christ's representative and intercessory work through the gift of faith alone, and for this reason He is also the justifier. God is both 'just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom. 3:26)." J. V. Fesko, *Romans* (LCECNT; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 85.

Now, some may push back at this point and think that what God has done is improper. If He is the Judge, then that's not how a judge should act. That's what a lot of people think when they hear the Gospel. Think about it. It's not unusual for someone to describe the gospel like this: "The gospel is like a judge who hears the case of a guilty person before him at the bar, and the judge pronounces the sentence. Then the judge steps back from the bench, takes off his robes, and goes down to take the guilty person's place in prison or pay the fine." But as Naselli points out, while there is truth in that description, it could be misleading to people in the West, given their understanding of judicial systems and how they operate. Andrew David Naselli, "The Righteous God Righteously Righteouses the Unrighteous: Justification according to Romans," in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 222.

If you turned on the news at all this week, you likely heard a lot about Amy Coney Barrett, the Supreme Court Nominee, whose confirmation hearing was this week. And if you watched much of that, you no doubt heard some politicians expressing their opinion that, if she is confirmed, she should recuse herself in certain cases, should they come before the Supreme Court in the future. So in our judicial system we have this notion of recusal.

"...in Western judicial systems, the judge must neutrally administrate the law. The guilty person's offense is not against the judge. If the guilty person is guilty for harming the judge, then the judge must recuse himself [or herself] from the case. Judges excuse themselves from a case because of a possible conflict of interest that makes it challenging for them to judge impartially. The judge is not supposed to be the offended party. Criminals offend the state or the law or the republic or the crown—not a neutral judge" (Ibid., 223).

We are accustomed to this principle in our judicial system. However, God is a judge of a different sort.

"God is both the judge and the most offended party when people sin. He never recuses himself, and he is always just. The reason he can justly pronounce believing sinners to be innocent is that Jesus propitiates his righteous wrath. Justice is served. Propitiation demonstrates that God is righteous when he declares that a believing sinner is righteous" (Ibid., 223).

³ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 87.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 84.

⁵ Shai Linne, "Random Thoughts 3," which you can hear online at: https://youtu.be/_m9QXno66Fs.

⁶ Naselli, 222-223.

⁷ John Piper, "The Most Important Paragraph in the Bible," accessed online at: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-most-important-paragraph-in-the-bible>.

⁸ This example is used powerfully by Piper (ibid.).

⁹ Ibid..

¹⁰ Matthew Barrett, "Christ Alone," in *Sola: How the Five Solas are Still Reforming the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 90.

¹¹ J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993, 2020), 62.

¹² R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019), 219.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Romans* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019), 85-86.