



Justification by God's Grace Through Faith Romans 3:9 - 31

Introduction

Since proclaiming the excellence of the gospel message in Romans 1:1-17, Paul has been showing that all people are sinners. Now he confirms the sinfulness of man by turning to Scripture. He presents carefully chosen passages from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah to show God's view of man. One commentator has remarked that the passages are strung together like a strand of pearls. They surely flow into each other in a beautiful way, although they paint a most disturbing picture. With these words of God in Romans 3:10-18, Paul completes his argument in preparation for presenting the gospel message. Having proved that all men and women are under sin and in need of salvation, Paul will go on to explain, in Romans 3:21-5:21, the message of the gospel; the righteousness of God now made fully evident.

Outline of Romans 3:9-31

- I. There is No One Who is Righteous - Romans 3:9-20
- II. Now the Righteousness of God is Revealed - Romans 3:21-31

I. There is No One Who is Righteous - Romans 3:9-20

This section begins with a rhetorical question: *What then? Are we (Jews) better than they?* Since the Jews have the *oracles of God* (Romans 3:2), and since God is faithful and true to the promises He has made in His word, does this make Jews better than Gentiles? Paul gives a definitive answer.

- A. All (both Gentiles and Jews) are under sin - Romans 3:9-18

Jews have advantages. The chief advantage they have is the possession of the *oracles of God*. But the Jews are not better than the Gentiles. *All are under sin* (3:9) — every Jew and every Gentile, without exception. All are guilty and accountable. Paul uses Old Testament Scripture to confirm this and to show the hopeless condition and corrupt character of sinful mankind. These passages clearly express the depravity of man. Without God, every person is devoid of good and absolutely helpless to help himself or herself. "Every person is *under sin* completely enslaved and dominated by sin" (The MacArthur Study Bible, John MacArthur).

- 1. *There is none righteous, no, not one* - 3:10

Here and in verses 11 and 12, Paul quotes from Psalms 14 and 53. From the human point of view, it may appear that some people are righteous, at least to a degree. But in God's eyes no one has any righteousness at all. See also Ecclesiastes 7:20.

- 2. *There is none who understands...none who seeks after God* - 3:11

There may be people who understand the ways of the world, being wise in their own eyes, but no one understands spiritual things. A person with understanding would not choose sin. Because human nature is corrupt, men and women refuse to acknowledge God (Romans 1:28). All can clearly see His power and deity through His creation (Romans 1:20), but they *suppress the truth in unrighteousness* (Romans 1:19). *Professing to be wise, they become fools* (Romans 1:22).

- 3. *They have all turned aside...become unprofitable...there is none who does good* - 3:12

Turned aside translates a Greek word which means to "deviate" or "depart" from the right way. In the ancient world it was used to describe a soldier who deserted. The prophet Isaiah points out that men prefer their own way to God's way. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way* (Isaiah 53:6).

Unprofitable means "corrupted." The NASB translates the word *useless*.

There is not a single solitary person who does good by his or her own power. *Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (Genesis 5:6).

- 4. Foul words betray degenerate hearts - 3:13-14

Paul uses Psalms 5, 10, and 140 to show God's view of men's speech. *Their throat is an open tomb* (3:13). "Nothing can be more abominable to the senses than an open sepulcher, where a dead body beginning to putrefy steams forth its tainted exhalations. What

proceeds out of their mouth is infected and putrid; and as the exhalation from a sepulcher proves the corruption within, so it is with the corrupt conversation of sinners" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane). Martin Luther sees this verse a bit differently -- as an open tomb ready to receive the dead. He pictures the wicked destroying those who listen to their deceitful teaching (*their tongues....have practiced deceit*, 3:13), drawing them into the open tomb.

The poison of asps is under their lips (3:13). The picture is of words filled with poison. As the snake's bag of poison is located under its mouth, so the poison of speech is under the lips, filling the words of the wicked with venom. *The tongue is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison* (James 3:8).

Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness (3:14). The word *full* means "an ample supply," denoting that *cursing* and *bitterness* flow continuously and never run out. *Cursing* refers to using scornful language to invoke evil upon someone. *Bitterness* refers to angry resentment. The bitterness of the tongue reflects bitterness in the heart. What does your tongue reveal about your heart?

5. There is only *destruction and misery*, no peace - 3:15-17

Paul has described the speech of sinners. Now he uses Isaiah 59:7-9 to describe their actions. *They are murderers. Their feet are swift to shed blood* (3:14). Swift *shows* that they are eager to do the deed.

Destruction and misery are in their ways (3:16). It is their way of life. It is what they do. It is what they bring upon other people.

The way of peace they have not known (3:17). The only way they know is the way of destruction and misery. They have no peace within themselves, no peace with others, and no peace with God. Do you know the way of peace? Do you have peace with God? Is there peace in your heart, peace in your home?

6. *There is no fear of God before their eyes* - 3:18

"Phobos," the Greek word translated *fear*, "designates a reverential fear (dread) of God as a controlling motive of life...fear of His power and righteous retribution...a wholesome dread of displeasing Him" (Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, W.E. Vine). The fact that the *fear of God* is not before their eyes is a figurative expression meaning it is not in their thoughts. They have no consciousness of depending upon Him or being responsible to Him. Instead, they have a total disregard for God. What about you? Do you fear God

or other people? Is your life controlled by the opinions of others or by the opinion of God?

- B. *All the world....guilty before God* - Romans 3:19-20

The Jews believed that the Gentiles were guilty. But they were sure that as possessors of the law of God, they had special privileges which exempted them from God's judgment. Paul's argument in these two verses points out the error of that belief. Paul points out that the passages he has quoted from Psalms and Isaiah (although spoken of the wicked) are as applicable to the Jews as to the Gentiles.

1. *Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law* - 3:19

The law here refers to the entire Old Testament, including Psalms and Isaiah, the books from which Paul has quoted. *The law* speaks (*it says*) because it is the living voice of God (Hebrews 4:12). The passages from Psalms speak directly to the Jews (*who are under the law*) and proclaim their guilt.

2. *That all the world may become guilty before God* - 3:19

The Jews will be compelled to acknowledge their guilt because *all the world* is guilty and accountable. This guilt will be openly revealed *in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ* (Romans 2:16). Guilty men and women excuse their own sins and delude themselves into thinking they are righteous. They may fool themselves, and even others for a while. But on Judgment Day, before God, all excuses will be swept away and all sins exposed. "Before Him, every mouth will be stopped, and all the world must confess themselves guilty" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

3. *By the deeds of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight* - 3:20

No living creature can be justified by doing the works of the law because every living creature has broken the law.

4. *By the law is the knowledge of sin* - 3:20

The word *knowledge* used here is the Greek "epignosis" and means "full knowledge"; a personal intimate knowledge, and not mere mental perception. The law does not only teach what is right and wrong and that sin exists. The law convicts men and women of their sin and reveals to them that they are sinners. "It is the straight-edge of the law that shows us how crooked we are" (J. B. Phillips, quoted in The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris).

II. Now the Righteousness of God is Revealed - Romans 3:21-31

Paul has shown that both Jews and Gentiles are hopelessly depraved sinners and subject to the condemnation of God. That is the bad news. Now Paul presents the good news. Because there is nothing human beings can do to make themselves right before God, He has provided the way of justification through His Son, Jesus Christ.

The righteousness of God (3:21) may refer to either His divine righteousness, which is a part of His nature, or to the gift of righteousness which comes from Him and is imputed to believers through Jesus Christ. *The righteousness of God*, as explained in Romans 3:21-31 embraces both of these meanings. Leon Morris, in The Epistle to the Romans, points out, "with the Jews, righteousness was first and foremost a legal standing. The righteous were those who secured the verdict when they stood before God. The man who is ultimately righteous is the one who is acquitted when tried at the bar of God's justice." God is righteous, and it is imputed righteousness through Jesus Christ which enables a man or woman to stand before Him.

A. *The righteousness of God apart from the law* - Romans 3:21

Righteousness before God cannot be earned by works of the law (Romans 3:20) or through any human effort. Here is the problem. God is the only righteous one. We are not righteous. So who is able to stand before God or be acquitted in His court? "The answer is: No one, unless God provides His own righteousness for us as a free gift" (Romans, Volume 3, James Montgomery Boice).

B. *The righteousness of God...witnessed by the Law and the Prophets* - Romans 3:21

The Old Testament bears witness to God's righteousness. It testifies to what God is doing now and shows that what is now revealed was God's purpose from the beginning. The law had only *a shadow of the good things to come* (Hebrews 10:1). *Those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has fulfilled* (1 Peter 1:18).

C. *The righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ* - Romans 3:22-23

The means by which righteousness is received is *faith*; it is given to *all who believe* (3:22). In other words, righteousness is given to all who have faith. Most importantly, that faith must be *in Jesus Christ* (3:22). Our faith must be in Christ and His work rather than in ourselves. "We are inadequate for what needs to

be done. Therefore, we must trust Christ, whom God has sent to be the Savior" (Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice). Paul will speak more about faith in chapter 4.

Righteousness is received only by faith because *all have sinned (there is no difference, 3:22) and fall short of the glory of God* (3:23). All are sinners, and sinners have no share in the divine glory because they do not live up to God's standard. Paul further explains the glory of God later in Romans.

Those who have *sinned and fall short* and cannot help themselves are justified through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22). Paul explains how sinners are brought into a right relationship with God by the work of Jesus Christ. He shows that salvation is all of God and nothing of man.

D. How God reveals His righteousness in saving sinners - Romans 3:24-26

"Paul explains the salvation of sinners by three very important terms: justification (imagery from the law court), redemption (imagery from the slave market), and propitiation (imagery from the averting of wrath)" (The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris).

1. *Justified freely by His grace* - 3:24

First, what is justification? The Greek word is "dikaiosyne" and comes from the root word "dikaio" which means "right" or "righteous." Therefore, justification and righteousness are closely linked. To be justified is to be declared righteous by God. The Westminster Short Catechism states "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

a. *Justified freely* - 3:24

Justification cannot be bought or worked for. Salvation is a free gift.

b. *Justified....by His grace* - 3:24

Sinners are justified out of the riches of God's generous goodness which He has *lavished upon us* (Ephesians 1:8, NASB). It is a gift which is wholly undeserved and should be received in grateful humility.

2. *Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* - 3:24

Redemption is "freedom for a price." In ancient slave markets it meant paying the necessary price (ransom)

to set the slave free. Christ's death was the ransom price to set sinners free from sin.

"The real thing for you to settle in your mind...is whether Christ is truly a Redeemer to you, and whether you find an actual redemption in Him...Do you realize that Christ is your Ransomer and has actually shed His blood for you as your ransom? Do you realize that your salvation has been bought, bought at a tremendous price, at the price of nothing less than blood, and that the blood of Christ, the Holy One of God? Or, go a step further: do you realize that this Christ who has thus shed His blood for you is Himself your God?" (Benjamin B. Warfield, as quoted in Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice).

3. *Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood - 3:24-25*

Propitiation means "removal of wrath." In ancient pagan religions, gods had to be appeased through the offering of sacrifices in order to turn away their wrath. God's wrath is not irrational and erratic like that envisioned of the pagan gods, but His wrath is very real! *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness* (Romans 1:18). God's wrath is perfectly righteous (Romans 3:5), but most importantly, God does not desire or take pleasure in offerings and sacrifices for sin (Hebrews 10:5-6), so He is the One who takes the initiative in averting His own wrath. This He did through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ.

God's purpose was to forgive sinful human beings and forgive them righteously, showing His total abhorrence of sin by inflicting just punishment. His plan was to inflict the full and deserved force of His wrath and punishment upon Himself in the person of His Son.

a. *A propitiation by His blood - 3:25*

God's purpose was accomplished by the shedding of Christ's blood. Propitiation was made effective by His blood.

b. *Through faith - 3:25*

Propitiation is received by faith. Christ's death on the cross removes the wrath of God from those who have faith.

c. *This demonstrates the righteousness of God - 3:25-26*

God's own righteousness may have been questioned in the past when in, *His forbearance*, He patiently held back His wrath against sin. Does God condone evil when He does not punish sin immediately? No. Paul

argues that God's forbearance in passing over *sins that were previously committed* was *just* (3:26) because now the cross shows God's righteousness. God's plan all along was to deal with sin once and with finality through the cross. "In that awful spectacle (Christ on the cross), God manifested His righteous displeasure against sin, forbidding us to attribute to indifference the forbearance by which He passed over, without adequate punishment, sins committed before Christ came" (The One Volume Commentary, J.R. Dummelow).

God's righteousness is demonstrated at the present time in the gospel message. Remember that the Old Testament with its types, shadows, and promises looked forward to this righteousness of God being revealed. (See notes on Romans 3:21.) The old was just a faint shadow, a distant glimpse into the full revelation of the righteousness of God.

E. *God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus - Romans 3:26*

To be *just* means "to be right and to have right conduct, to be righteous." God's justifying sinners through faith in Jesus Christ and His work of redemption and propitiation demonstrates His righteousness; He is just and His acts are just.

God's demonstration of His righteousness proved His character as just. He is righteous (just) in the way He justifies. He did not take the forgiveness of sins lightly. It was of great cost to Him. God Himself bore the burden of sin in the person of His only begotten Son (John 3:16). He showed His abhorrence of evil and the grace and mercy of His forgiveness in the act of justifying those who put their faith in Jesus. God is the Just Justifier. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

F. *Man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law - Romans 3:27-31*

Salvation is by faith alone. "The Scripture says that we are justified *by faith* (Galatians 2:16) or *through faith* (Ephesians 2:8). Faith is the instrument or channel by which the righteousness of God in Christ becomes ours." (Romans Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice). Paul explains in this passage that God justifies sinners purely through faith in Christ, who satisfied the law for their sake.

1. *Boasting....is excluded - 3:27-28*

Because salvation is by faith alone, there is no place for boasting. The Greek verb tense of *is excluded* shows that boasting has been excluded once and for all.

Paul's conclusion, which is the conclusion of the entire passage, Romans 3:21-26 (See especially verses 22, 25, and 26.), is that *a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law* (verse 28).

2. There is one God who justifies both Jew and Gentile by faith - 3:29-30

Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one! (Deuteronomy 6:4). There is one God. He is the one and only God, of both Jews and Gentiles. He is the God of all people and justifies all in the same manner, through faith alone. There is one way of salvation, and that is faith.

3. The law is established through faith - 3:31

What Paul has been teaching about faith is not contrary to the law, but in perfect accord with the law and validated by the law. The Jews believed that the law came from God and showed them God's way of salvation. Paul has said that the law itself is not the way of salvation. The purpose of the law was never to justify sinners. Salvation has always been through faith (which Paul will demonstrate in chapter 4). However, salvation by grace through faith is not a contradiction of the law. The gospel of salvation in Christ (Romans 3:22-25) shows the true purpose of the law. The law prepared the way for Christ and pointed the way to Christ. Christ came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17). He fulfilled the law in His life by living a perfect, sinless life. He fulfilled the law in His death as an atonement for sin, one sacrifice, once for all.

Applications

1. Do you acknowledge your own sin? What sins do you need to confess to God right now?
2. In what have you placed your faith? Are you justified through faith in Jesus Christ who redeemed you from slavery to sin and propitiated the wrath of God on your behalf?
3. How amazing is God's grace to you? Will you stop right now and consider the depth of what He has done for you? Will you thank Him for *His indescribable gift* (2 Corinthians 9:15) that is yours through His grace? Today, the word "awesome" is used frequently by people to describe beautiful things or pleasurable experiences. However, in the light of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, everything else pales. It seems to this writer that only God and His gracious work through His Son Jesus Christ can legitimately be called "awesome." Will you humbly acknowledge your sin to the one and only awesome God and place your faith in Him?
4. In what do you take pride? In whom or what do you boast? In what way do you see yourself as better than others? Will you confess your prideful indulgences and receive Christ's righteousness by faith alone?

QUESTIONS

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

Day One: Read all notes and references.

1. How did Paul convince you of the total depravity of man?

2. Explain how it is possible for a hopelessly depraved sinner to be made right before God.

Day Two: Read Romans 3:27-4:2.

3. a. According to Paul's conclusion in Chapter 3, how is a person justified? Give verse.

b. By comparing Romans 3:28 and 4:2, what do you think Paul will now set out to prove in chapter 4?
4. a. ? (Thought Question) How would you define "faith?"

b. Use Ephesians 2:8 and Romans 12:3 to tell where faith comes from.
5. a. Who had Abraham as a forefather according to the flesh? See Acts 7:2 and 8 if you need help.

b. In light of this, to whom is Romans 4 primarily addressed?

Day Three: Read Romans 4:3-8.

6. a. How does the Scripture say Abraham was justified (made righteous in God's sight)?

b. Where does the Scripture first record this? See references in the margin of your Bible and tell how this Scripture shows that Abraham was justified by faith and not works?
7. a. What is credited to the account of one who works? Give verse.

b. Using Romans 6:23 and all you have learned in Romans so far, what wage does a worker earn?

c. What is credited to the account of one who does not work, but believes in God as the justifier of the ungodly?
8. a. Give the one word David uses in the Psalms (as quoted here by Paul) to describe the person who does not work, but believes.

b. What aspect of the blessedness does Paul emphasize in Romans 4:6?

- c. Since there are *none righteous* (Romans 3:10), where does this person's righteousness come from according to Romans 3:21-24, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and 2 Peter 1:1?
9. a. What aspect of blessedness does the quote from David's Psalm bring out? Give three points David makes.
- b. To whom have this person's sins been imputed? See Isaiah 53:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21.
- c. ? (Thought Question) By combining your answers from 8. c. and 9. b. above, what great truth do you find repeated which was also taught in Romans 3:21-25?

Day Four: Read Romans 4:9-15.

10. a. What is the blessedness Paul speaks of in verse 9? Hint: refer back to verses of previous day.
- b. What questions does Paul bring up concerning the blessing?
- c. What is the answer?
11. If Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised (Genesis:15:6), why was it necessary that he be circumcised (Genesis 17:24) many years later? Give as many reasons as you can. Give verses.
12. a. What two categories of people have Abraham as their spiritual father?
- b. ? (Thought Question) Name some people from both the Old and New Testaments who fall into one or the other of these groups.
- c. What did all these have in common?
13. a. What was the promise God made to Abraham which Paul brings up in this passage? See also Romans 4:17-18, Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 15:5, and Genesis 17:5.
- b. Was this promise through law or faith?
- c. Why did it have to be this way? Give verses.

Day Five: Read Romans 4:16-21 and Genesis 18:9-15.

14. Why is faith the only way in which the promises of God are made sure?
15. a. Whom did Abraham believe?
- b. What did Abraham believe about Him?
16. a. What sustained Abraham's faith?
- b. How do 1 Timothy 4:10 and Hebrews 6:18-19 explain how a believer's hope is different from worldly optimism?
17. a. Using both the Romans and Genesis passages, why might it have been easy for Abraham to waver in unbelief?
- b. Instead of wavering in unbelief, what did Abraham do in reference to his faith?
- c. Why was this so? Give verse
- d. Who received the glory?

Day Six: Read Romans 4:22-25 and Hebrews 11:8-12.

18. a. In verse 22, how does Paul conclude his argument concerning Abraham's faith?
- b. Are you convinced from his argument that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works? Why or why not?
- c. How does Hebrews 11:8-12 concur with what Paul says in Romans 4?
19. a. For whose sake, besides Abraham, was Genesis 15:6 written?
- b. How do the following Scripture passages explain this?
- Romans 15:4
- 1 Corinthians 10:11
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17
20. As Abraham believed God's promise, what must we believe? Give verse.