

By God's Grace (Romans 3)

In chapter 3 of Romans, Paul is in the middle of an argument that he began back in chapter 1, verse 18. This segment of the argument comes to a conclusion in verse 20. We join Paul, who is still using a style of writing known as a diatribe, primarily addressing non-Christian Jews with this imaginary question and answer format, arguing against righteousness by works of the law, or good works in general. He began primarily addressing self-righteous Jews back in chapter 2 verse 11. And he continues here in verse 1 of chapter 3 by stepping away from the main argument for a moment, to address a couple of other issues on his mind at this point. He returns to the main argument in verse 9.

At the end of chapter 2, Paul has made the point that being a Jew or having the law of God in their possession, is not enough to be accounted right in God's eyes. True circumcision is of the heart, not of the flesh; walking by faith in the Spirit and not in the strength of our own human nature. So he asks the question, "are there any advantages to being Jewish or to having been circumcised as a Jew?" He answers the question emphatically, "yes, much in every way!" Mostly because to them were the Scriptures of God given. (Romans 3:1-2)

The written word of God had been given to the Jewish people first. Beginning with Moses and on through all the prophets, God's complete revelation up to that point had been given, and was available to and in the possession of people of Jewish ancestry. The revelation of God's word and will, His righteousness, had been revealed to this chosen group of people. So the benefits are immeasurable, in that they had in their possession the truth about the Creator and His basis for relationship with Him! In Romans 9:4-5, Paul lists other benefits of being a Jew:

who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. (NKJV)

God has truly been faithful to Israel. But, Paul continues,

what if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Of course not! Though everyone else in the world is a liar, God is true. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." (Romans 3:3-4, NIV/NLT)

God's judgment is always fair, right and true; perfect in every way. There are some things that God cannot do. He cannot tempt and He cannot lie, for example. So too, His judgments will always line up with His perfect, divine character. He will never contradict His own nature.

But if our unrighteousness (unfaithfulness) brings out God's righteousness (faithfulness) more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (That is

actually the way some people talk.) Of course not! If God is not just, how is he qualified to judge the world? (Romans 3:5-6, NIV/NLT)

But, some might still argue, how can God judge and condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights his truthfulness and brings him more glory? If you follow that kind of thinking, however, you might as well say that the more we sin the better it is! Those who say such things deserve to be condemned, yet some slander me by saying this is what I preach! (Romans 3:7-8, NLT)

Verses 7 & 8 are a kind of an amplification of verses 5 & 6. In these verses, Paul is bringing up some irrational statements that some people had made about God's grace. I think this shows the irrational nature of man when separated from God. "Well, how is it right for God to judge us when our wrong doing just magnifies His love, forgiveness and faithfulness?" Paul simply replies that God must be just because He cannot contradict His own nature. Otherwise, how would He be qualified to judge mankind? Some others were saying that it would be okay to sin because it will bring more of God's grace! Paul thoroughly deals with this kind of thinking in Romans chapter 6. Paul has just shown in the previous chapters that right standing with God can only be by His grace, because it is not something that we can earn on our own. And if by God's grace, then it must be by faith. How else can we receive it if we don't believe in it and ask for it? We are accounted righteous by faith because of the redemptive work of Jesus at the cross. The fruit of righteousness must follow being justified by God. We have been given the righteousness of Christ and born again of God. The Spirit of God now dwells within us. Paul said that it was no longer him who lived, but Christ living in him, and that we are new creations in Christ. The fruit of true faith will be righteousness, to increasing degrees over time, as we walk in this new life in a true relationship with God. Sin does not follow from grace, but relationship. The fruit of our relationship to the Spirit of God and His working in us by grace is love, and the characteristics of love are joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In verse 9 Paul asks the question, "are we (Jews) better than the rest of the world?" Part of what he means is that even though the Jews have been given the way to the benefits and special relationship with God, they are not just given right standing with God regardless of their lack of faith. To the question, "are Jews just inherently better than the rest of the world", Paul, thinking back to his whole argument beginning in chapter 1:18 to the present point, answers, "no, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin (Romans 3:9, NLT)."

Now, from verse 10 through verse 18, Paul quotes several passages from the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). This should be the final "nail in the coffin" in his argument, to the Jews especially, that even they fall short in their natural state, in their human nature, of the glory and standard of God. It is the decisive blow in the argument because he uses their own Scripture to prove it. Paul quotes from the Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah and Isaiah, and says in verse 19 that the law was first and foremost speaking directly to the Jews. Paul is telling them that this is God's word and it has been

spoken and given to you, so you must see that these verses clearly portray all people, including yourselves, as not being in right standing with God in your own strength.

As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one. They have all turned aside. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to bring the entire world into judgment before God. (Romans 3:10-19 abbreviated, NKJV/NLT)

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight (justified) by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin (or, by the law is the knowledge of sin). (Romans 3:20, NIV, NKJV)

The law was not given to justify us. It was given to us to expose our innate sinfulness. It reveals the fact that the whole world is guilty before God. Common sense would tell us that good works could never cover previous sins, making it as if they had never happened. So the law points out our guilt and need for the grace of God to have mercy on us and forgive us our sins. Rules cannot make us good, they can only tell us what and what not to do. And keeping a certain set of rules does not nullify any of our breaking of the rules prior to striving to keep them. This is why Paul said in 2 Cor. 3:6, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" and in Rom. 7:6, "but now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter." The writer of Hebrews (10:20) said, "by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh (by means of His death for us).

In verse 21, the two words "But now..." begin an entirely new thought, bringing us back to the subject of this letter and its introduction in 1:16-17. These two words are the transition from the old way to the new way, where Christ is the center point in human history, or the point in our individual lives when we went from being dead in our sins to alive to God in Christ. There is an answer for our sin. There is a solution to our separation from God. Up to this point in Paul's letter things are looking pretty dim. We cannot do anything about our sin, neither can we control it and have power over it, nor can we atone for it in our own strength. So where does that leave us? Deserving of death and with no way out. "But now..." These two words usher in the New Covenant, the new era. They usher in the Way that God has made. Jesus said, "I am the Way." Romans 1:18 to 3:20 has been focused on the old, and its inability to do anything but reveal our sin and separation from our loving and just Creator. But now... But now! The New Covenant, our hope and the anchor of our lives; not only forgiveness, but intimacy with God and sufficiency for Godly living. But now! A new and living way. What wonderful words of hope and light!

The reformer Martin Luther, speaking of Romans 3:21-26, called this section "the chief point, and the very central place of the epistle, and of the whole Bible."

But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight--not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us. God was being entirely fair and just when he did not punish those who sinned in former times. And he is entirely fair and just in this present time when he declares sinners to be right in his sight because they believe in Jesus.

(Romans 3:21-26, NLT)

Verse 21: But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (NKJV)

The righteousness of God here is the justifying activity of God. On His side, His intervention to deliver His people. From the human side, acquittal from sin given to the person declared just by faith in Christ. By faith alone, apart from any law or good works, God credits faith in Him as righteousness- as if we had never sinned. Through faith we are now "in Christ". When God looks at us He sees and accounts to us the righteousness of Jesus. And this righteousness, revealed apart from keeping the law, is revealed through the gospel, the good news proclaimed by Christ's followers. (Romans 1:16-17).

In the early church the Scriptures consisted of "the Law", which was the five books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, and "the Prophets", the rest of Hebrew scripture, which together, is what we now call the Old Testament. Jesus said that the Hebrew Scriptures were all about Him, and so the promise of right standing with God by faith in the Messiah, Christ Jesus, is attested to in the OT, as well, as Paul points out in verse 21. In chapter 4 of Romans, Paul gives us two (of many) examples of people in the OT being accounted right with God by their faith in Him, in the Hebrew patriarch Abraham and a king of Israel, David. Hebrews chapter 11 gives us several more examples of the people of God made right with Him by their faith in Him. Where we are today, 2,000 years since Christ, we look back to the cross, but the people of God in the OT looked forward to the work of Messiah. Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that God made promises to Abraham and to His descendent (his "seed", singular), which was Christ. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of so many that they were innumerable like the stars, but Abraham had some understanding of the One descendent, through whom, all the world would be blessed. And Abraham believed God, thus, in this way, placing His faith in Christ 2,000 years before the cross!

Verse 22-23: even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (NKJV)

Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, that "Christ became sin for us". Our sin has been laid on Him at the cross, where He received the just punishment for our sin, which is death. In God's sight, the righteousness of Christ has been accounted to us by faith. And all can be saved this same way. No matter who we are or what we have done. This is quite an astounding statement, and offensive to many. When we think of the horrible sins committed by some, it may be hard to swallow. But anyone that turns to God with a true faith in Christ's atoning death is accounted righteous in His sight! And, even more, will share in God's glory in eternity (Romans 5:2). The fact that all can be saved this same way also eliminates any distinction between gender, race/ethnicity or social status.

Verse 24: being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (NKJV)

Justification by faith, that is, being made right with God through faith in Christ's sacrificial death, is a totally and completely free gift of God to mankind. Paul has shown conclusively from chapter 1:18 through 3:20 that salvation is attainable in no other way and by no other name. If right standing with God must be a free gift from Him, than it is attainable by faith alone. The free gift is given "by His grace". God's grace is a fountain that never stops flowing forth!

Now, justice is getting what one deserves and mercy is not getting what one deserves. Grace is God's undeserved kindness and goodness toward mankind. Justified (v24), or declared not guilty, could be further defined as just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned. Astonishingly, that is how God sees it. That is His grace! And our salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone.

In Luke 18, Jesus gives an illustration of what justifying faith looks like.

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else: "Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery, I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored." (Luke 18:9-14, NLT)

The greek word *dikaioo* (de-ki-ah-o) translated "justified" in Luke 18:14 is the same greek word Paul uses in Romans 3:24. Because of the man's humble heart to God and confession of his sinful state, God says that he is acquitted of his sin, not guilty in His sight. God is looking for the humble, contrite heart. In giving up on our own ability we are turning it over to God to take care of for us, and that is the expression of belief and obedience to God's will, that is faith. And a true heart toward Him is all that God asks of us. Faith is not a work, nor is it something that we can or should "work up". Faith is

trusting in God, our loving Creator and Father, completely relying on His mercy and just taking Him at His word.

In verse 24, Paul uses another word that we should take a closer look at: redemption. He said that we are freely saved by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The greek word for redemption used by Paul means "liberation through payment of a price." In the second and first centuries B. C., "redemption" often refers to the "ransoming" of prisoners of war, slaves and condemned criminals. If "redemption" has this connotation here, then Paul would be presenting Christ's death as a "ransom", a "payment" that takes the place of that penalty for sins "owed" by all people to God (Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT), p.229).

Verse 25: 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, (NKJV)

In Paul's view, sin is the power from which mankind needs to be liberated (redeemed) (Romans 3:9). In verse 25, he states that God set forth Jesus as the propitiation by His (Jesus') blood. Mankind is justified freely by God's grace through faith in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the propitiation, the atoning sacrifice, and through faith in His redemptive work, we are acquitted of guilt and declared righteous and Holy as an undeserved, unmerited free gift from God.

The greek word translated "propitiation" in verse 25 is translated "mercy seat" almost every time it is used in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint). The only other time it is used in the New Testament is in the book of Hebrews (9:5), where it is also translated "mercy seat". The basis of our forgiveness is the substitutionary death of Christ. Sin met its consequence (the sentence on sin is death) when Jesus gave His life for our sin (He was without sin and did not deserve death). The meaning meant in the word propitiation speaks of appeasing, expiating or satisfaction. Justice is appeased, the punishment for sin is satisfied, the sin is expiated by Christ's blood.

All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's path to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, NLT)

John the Baptist declared that Jesus was the "Lamb of God". Under the Old Covenant, animals were sacrificed for the sin of the people. Jesus becomes the fulfillment of those sacrifices, being sacrificed "once for all." In the book of Hebrews, the writer proclaims that Jesus is our "Great High Priest", the one who fulfills the OT priesthood by entering into God's presence on our behalf. And here in Romans 3, when Paul calls Jesus "the Mercy Seat", I think (as most commentators do) that he has the Levitical sacrificial system in mind. Jesus becomes the fulfillment of the "mercy seat" as well, the place that atonement/propitiation is made.

Jesus' death is the fulfillment of the "Day of Atonement" ritual described in Leviticus chapters 16 & 17. Once a year, the high priest (one of Aaron's descendants), a Levite, would enter into the inner room (The Holy of Holies or The Most Holy Place) of the

Hebrew temple, or tabernacle, and offer a sacrifice for himself and for the sins of the nation. God accepted this shedding of blood and counted the sin as propitiated, covered/removed/atoned for/expiated. The mercy seat was the cover of the ark of the covenant, above which the presence of the LORD dwelt. The ark was located in the Holy of Holies. The blood of the sacrifice would be sprinkled by the priest onto the mercy seat, and at that point atonement was made.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.'
(Leviticus 17:11, NKJV)

The life of the people, which was under the punishment of death because of their sins, was offered to God in the blood as the life of the victim. God, by this ceremony, was appeased and the sins of the people propitiated.

The Levitical system pre-figured the true, it was a foreshadow of the real redemptive work that Jesus accomplished. The blood of bulls and goats was a figurative blood, and the cover of the ark of the covenant was a figurative mercy seat. These elements of the temple, along with the temple itself, were only copies of their real counterparts in heaven, the eternal dwelling place of God. Christ is the true "Mercy Seat", the place of atonement, and by His innocent blood, the substitutionary sacrifice is forever (not year after year). He is both the "sacrificial Lamb of God" and the "High Priest" who enters in, and makes a way for all to enter into God's presence, God's throne of grace, by faith.

The shadows of the true which was to come have been fulfilled in and by Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah of the Hebrew people. In Hebrews chapter 10, the writer points out that where there is true remission of sin, there is no more remembrance of sin. If the sacrifices being made by the high priest under the Old Covenant were sufficient, they would not have had to keep coming back year after year. But Jeremiah, speaking of God's promise of a New Covenant, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts", also said that God will "remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:31-34)". So, "where there is remission of sin, there is no longer an offering for sin (Hebrews 10:17-18)." Only through the "once for all" sacrifice of Christ are sins remembered no more.

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22, NKJV)

For more on Christ as the fulfillment of things related to the OT priesthood and sacrifices, and how the New Covenant replaces the Old Covenant, see Hebrews chapters 8, 9 & 10 and Jeremiah 31:31-34.

In verse 25 of Romans, Paul also points out that God was being entirely fair and just when he did not punish those who sinned in former times (before the cross). They were

ceremonially made clean and God saved them by their faith, looking ahead to the death of Christ for sin to be truly removed forever.

Verse 26: to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NKJV)

Verse 26 is somewhat of an amplification of the last half of verse 25. God is just in His judgment of sin and just in justifying those who have faith in Jesus. The way that God has made, death being the judgment for sin and justification by grace through faith in Christ, demonstrates His righteousness, whether for those before the cross or after, those under the Old Covenant or the New. God is also just in accepting the faith of those that died before the cross of Christ, just as He is right in justifying those who accept Christ after the cross. God is just, even in His justifying.

In 3:27-31, Paul begins a new thought in his argument, that he will carry out through chapter 4 and on into chapter 5. We cannot boast of our right standing with God because boasting speaks of works, something we have done. But right standing with God is a free gift of God, given by faith in Christ alone. Jesus has done the work for us, we may only receive it by faith.

But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14, NKJV)

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. (Ephesians 2:8-10, NKJV)

Some nations boast of their armies and weapons, but we boast in the LORD our God. (Psalm 20:7, NLT)

In verse 29-30, Paul asks, "is God the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised (the Jew) by faith and the uncircumcised (the Gentile) through faith."

When Paul says "there is one God", he seems to be referring to one of the most basic Jewish beliefs, monotheism, and turns it around on them.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! (Deuteronomy 6:4, NKJV)

If there is one God, than He must be the God of the Gentiles, as well. And if of the Gentiles, then salvation must be of faith for both Jew and Gentile.

Finally, Paul states that the law is not made void by faith, but is actually established by it. Christ is the fulfillment of the law. As Christians, we are empowered to fulfill the law only by the indwelling presence of Christ in our hearts. We could never live up to the law in our own strength. Only by His Spirit can we love God with all of our hearts and love

our enemies as ourselves. A true faith in Christ will bare the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, and will flow forth from the heart of the person born of God.

The law was established by faith as a guide and revealer, “a tutor”, to lead us to the righteousness of Christ by faith. But, by faith, we are now bound by a greater law, the law of love. Paul said, “the love of Christ constrains (or compels) me (2 Cor. 5:14).” In Colossians 2:10, Paul said that we are “complete in Him”, perfect. God sees you as perfect in Christ. Perfection cannot be improved! Having begun in the Spirit, we must continue in the Spirit by abiding in Christ, staying connected to Him always. Like salvation by faith, we continue this walk in faith, depending fully and completely on His abiding grace, His sufficiency alone, the empowering of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In chapter 4, Paul uses Abraham and David as prime examples of justification by faith. Faith is not new, and does not cancel out the law of Moses, but supports its purpose. Abraham’s faith came 400 years before the law.