

GOD JUSTIFIES SINNERS BY FAITH IN CHRIST

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Introduction: What is God doing when He justifies sinners? He is declaring that they are righteous, as though they had never sinned. How can God do that when the penalty for any sin is separation from Him and to be cast into Hell? He loves all sinners and wants to save them from Hell (1 Tim 2:4). He does not want any to perish (2 Pet 3:9). But the penalty for our sins had to be paid. So, He sent His Son to earth to be one like us, except for our sins. He knew no sin. Jesus loved us like His Father loved us. With His love for us and His loving obedience to His Father, Jesus shed His blood on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins.

"Without shedding of blood is no remission" for our sins (Heb 9:22). However, only sinners that put their faith in Jesus Christ's death on the cross for them are justified. When God sees the blood of His Son applied to our sins, He does not see our sins any more. The penalty for all our sins, past, present and even future sins, are paid in full. We become new persons that do not want to sin, even though we will stumble into sin. Someone has used these words to describe what it means to be justified: "just as if I'd never sinned."

Paul has already proved the sinfulness of Gentiles (1:18-32), of moral persons (2:1-16), and even the Jews, who had God's law (2:17-24), kept His rite of circumcision (2:25-27), and were of the lineage of Abraham (2:28-29). This was so shocking to the Jews that they despaired of any advantage. They were told that they had the Word of God to which He would be faithful (3:1-4). He will judge them by His Son, the Word of God (Jn 1:14; 5:22, 27), and His judgment will be just (3:5-8).

Now Paul presses the charge against both Jew and Gentile before the bar of God's justice and declares that they are "all under sin" (3:9). Then he presents the evidence and shows that there is "none righteous" (3:10-18). Finally, the verdict is given: the entire world is "guilty before God" (3:19-20) and deserve His wrath (1:18). Then Paul immediately begins the good news of God's work of justification (3:21-5:21).

I. Judgment of the Jews Confirmed — 3:1-8

A. They Questioned Their Privileged Position — 3:1-4

1. The question stated — 3: 1

3:1 — The first eight verses of this chapter must be considered in context with chapter 2:17-29. Paul knew the Jews were proud because God had chosen to give them His Law. They took this to mean they were better than the Gentiles, but Paul asked how they could be better when they disobeyed the Law that they taught to others (2:19-22). They dishonored God when they disobeyed Him (2:23). They actually caused the Gentiles to blaspheme God when they saw the Jews disobey His Law (2:24). As a result, the Jews were not better than the Gentiles, but worse than the moral Gentiles, who will judge them (2:25-27). So, Paul concluded that circumcision profits only those who have cut sin from their hearts (cf. 2:25, 28, 29). Jews needed to be circumcised in their flesh and in their hearts to have favor with God. Their sins are removed by faith in Christ's death and resurrection. After such a strong argument for the condemnation of the Jews, Paul anticipated two questions, "What advantage does the Jew have?" "What is the profit of circumcision?" (3:1).

2. The question answered — 3:2-4

3:2 — The Jews had a great advantage because to them were entrusted the oracles (words) of God (cp. Acts 7:38; Heb 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11). The words of God revealed the promises of God about the awesome plan of God to save the Jews from their sins and save people from all tribes and nations

through the Jews. He would make them His children and glorify them. Here the words of God probably referred to the prophecies and promises to the Jews when they are related to the Messiah (Christ).

3:3 — Even though some Jews did not believe the prophecies and promises in the Word of God, their unbelief could not annul the faithfulness of God in keeping His Word. His Word is still valid for all Jews (and Gentiles) who believe it. It was a privilege for the Jews to be entrusted with God's powerful Word. However, many Jews stopped short of obeying it. They were taught that being entrusted with God's Word meant that they were not to lose possession of it. If they kept possession of it, they were taught that God would keep them from their enemies and bless them with life after death. They accepted this lie and did not take their responsibility seriously to obey the Word of God. When Paul exposed the lie that they were taught, the Jews protested against Paul's teaching, calling it a breach of God's promise. Was this unbelief (unfaithfulness) among most Jews able to undermine the faithfulness of God to keep His Word? Not in any way! Otherwise He could not judge unbelievers or keep His promises to believers.

3:4 — God's Word is established on truth so His promises will never fail. The unbelieving Jews taught contrary to God's Word. They opposed God by telling lies about His Word, but they could not stop Him from fulfilling all of His promises. Many are yet to be fulfilled. God is faithful to deliver on all of His promises (cf. Dan 9:24-27; Rom 9-11). He will overcome those that oppose Him. God will judge unbelieving Jews, but He will keep His promises to the believing Jews.

B. They Questioned God's Punishment of Sin — 3:5-8

1. The question stated — 3:5

3:5 — Paul knew the arguments of the unbelieving Jews, since he had been one, so he anticipated another argument which the Jews would claim for immunity from God's judgment: The question: if our sin (unrighteousness) commends (brings into clearer light) the righteousness of God, is not God unrighteous in passing judgment upon us? In other words, God would be unjust to punish the Jews for their sins because God ultimately will receive greater glory when He saves them by His grace.

"I speak as a man" — This was Paul's way of indicating the foolishness of their question.

2. The question answered — 3:6-8

3:6 — Paul forcefully denied the legitimacy of the Jews' argument. Paul applied the logical conclusion of their argument to God's judgment of the Gentile world. If God cannot judge the Jews because He ultimately receives greater glory from their sin, how then can He judge the Gentiles? Hence, God could never judge anyone. The argument that he anticipated from the Jews would be contrary to God's holy reaction to sin.

3:7 — This verse amplifies further the logical conclusion of their fallacious reasoning given in verse 5. Paul indicated that if the principle suggested in verse 5 is accepted, then God would be unjust in judging Jews. They could lie because that would more clearly manifest the truth of God.

3:8 — The final result of such illogical reasoning would lead to Jesuit ethics, namely, the end justifies the means. In fact, some charged Paul with this doctrine because he taught salvation by grace alone and not by works. However, their charge was absolutely false. Paul preached that all sinners needed to repent of their sins and turn to God. They also needed to show by good works that they had repented of their sins (Acts 26:20). Their circular paradoxical reasoning was sinful and their judgment was just.

II. Judgment of the World Concluded — 3:9-20

A. The Conclusion Stated — 3:9

3:9 — "What then?" — This expression meant, "What is the conclusion?" The previous judgments against the Jews needed a concluding statement (2:17-3:9).

"Are we better than they?" — In other words, are the Jews better than the Gentiles? Paul did not mention the moralists because they were found among the Gentiles and the Jews, so the world was divided into two groups: the Jews and the Gentiles.

"No, in no wise" — This double negative is an emphatic statement, "No, not at all." The Jews had absolutely nothing by which they could be exempted from condemnation because the Jews were like the Gentiles: filthy, deceitful sinners (Isa 64:6; Jer 17:9).

"Under sin" — This phrase means that Jews were ruled by the dominion or empire of sin like the Gentiles. Each individual in the world is portrayed as under a crushing weight from which no one can escape. Sin not only is an act but also a state of being. If all are under sin, then all are guilty before God.

B. The Conclusion Shown — 3:10-18

1. By a corrupted character — 3:10-12

3:10-12 — Paul showed from the Old Testament that all people are naturally depraved and ruled by sin. In this section, Paul either quotes or stresses this truth from Psalms 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 140; Isaiah 59:7-8. There is no one doing right (v. 10), there is no one who seeks after God in their thoughts or actions (v. 11). The natural state of unbelievers is to run from God, not to Him. Paul's description of all unsaved people shows the depth of their depravity (cf. 1:21). They have become undesirable, like filthy, bloody rags (Isa 64:6). They are unclean and sick, like people with a contagious disease, so they are quarantined and cannot go to God to save them from their sins.

So, how does God deal with these sinners? Their sins have separated them from Him and they cannot seek Him. But there is one ray of hope for them; God is seeking sinners. Why? He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). He wants all people to be saved and has provided the ransom for their sins (1 Tim 2:4, 6). Since God is seeking sinners, they can respond and seek Him. Some do, many do not. If God seeks sinners and elects them solely by His sovereign will, it seems He would elect all sinners, since He wants all sinners to be saved. But when only a small minority are elected, it should tell us that our understanding of His sovereign will in electing sinners is faulty. There is no question that God is sovereign, but in what way is He sovereign in His election of sinners? There may be other options, but there is an option that supports the "whosoever will" verses and the "faith" verses for salvation in Scripture (10:13, 17; Jn 3:16, 36): God provided salvation for all sinners through His Son and made a sovereign decision that all sinners, with a sound mind, must make a choice by faith to receive His Son as their Savior or by disbelief reject Him as their Savior.

Some Christians will say that faith is a gift of God, so His sovereignty decides which sinners will receive His gift of faith. There is no clear verse in the Bible that supports such a claim, and this claim presents a serious problem. If God decides who receives His gift of faith to do His will, then it seems God withheld faith from Adam and Eve, which caused them to sin. Forbid the thought! God gave them His Word to warn them and keep them from sin so He could bless them. However, they had to make a choice based on their belief or disbelief of God's Word. Faith is not the gift of God; His Word is His gift. "Faith comes by hearing ... the Word of God" (10:17).

How does God seek sinners? He sent His Son "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:10). Jesus sought some notable sinners, who responded to Him and were saved while He was on earth were Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10), Nicodemus (Jn 3:1-21; 19:39), the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-28); and the man born blind (Jn 9:1-38). He also sought sinners by His death on the cross where He "gave Himself a ransom for all" sinners (1 Tim 2:6) and propitiated His Father for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2).

Another way that God is seeking sinners is through their conscience. He has written the law on the hearts of all people to convict them of their sin through their consciences (2:15). This law will not

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convert them, but it will convict them. They need to be convicted of their wickedness before they will seek God.

God also seeks sinners through believers, who are Christ's ambassadors. As ambassadors we are to beseech, beg, plead with sinners as though God Himself were pleading, so that they are reconciled to Him through Christ (2 Cor 5:20). When God seeks sinners, they can respond by seeking Him. They may be like Zacchaeus who climbed a tree to see Jesus and then welcomed Jesus into his home where Jesus saved him (Lk 19:1-10). They may begin by going to a place of worship or by reading the Scriptures to learn more about Him, like the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-39). Or, they may fear God and live a moral life, give alms to needy people and humbly pray to God each day, like Cornelius (Acts 10:1-48). This will not save them, but God will be merciful to them and bring them in contact with a believer to show them how they can be saved.

The sinner that God is seeking is commanded to seek the Lord while He may be found and call on Him while He is near (Isa 55:6). How will they know when He is near? They will know He is near when they hear or read that Jesus Christ died for their sins and rose from the dead to give them eternal life (6:23; 1 Cor 15:3-4). When they hear and understand the Gospel, this is the time that they should call on the Lord. He will be found when they call on the Lord with faith to save them (10:13). Faith in the blood of Jesus' sacrifice will justify them (3:21-28). When the wicked are saved, they will be able to forsake their evil ways and the unrighteous persons their ungodly thoughts (Isa 55:7).

Some Christians believe that no one can seek Jesus for salvation unless the Father draws them to His Son. This is true (Jn 6:44), but notice how Jesus said His Father draws sinners to Him (Jn 6:45). Jesus quoted Isaiah 54:13 to the Jews and said His Father teaches all sinners (evidently by His creation, by their conscience, by His Spirit, and by the Scriptures). However, only those that hear what He says and learn the truth that He is teaching them will be drawn to His Son for salvation. Sinners are responsible to learn what God is teaching them before they will be drawn to Jesus for salvation.

2. By a corrupt conduct — 3:13-17

a. Our speech — 3:13-14

3:13-14 — Our speech is an indication of our heart's condition (cf. Mt 12:34). Our throat (larynx) is an open sepulcher – it is like a grave that stands ready to receive death and corruption. The open grave probably indicates the offensive stench which would arise from decaying bodies (Jer 5:16). The natural person has speech emitting a stench that comes "with deceit." Sinners continuously "make smooth their tongue" so that they flatter others for their own selfish advantage. The corrupting influence of their speech is seen by comparing it to the poisonous asps. The adder had deadly bags of poison stored under its lips which would not only produce pain but also cause death; as does the natural person's speech. Notice the progression: throat, tongue, lips, so that the mouth pours forth cursing and bitterness.

b. Our activity — 3:15-17

3:15-17 — These verses indicate that the violence in the world comes from within the heart of sinners, not from their environment. The feet symbolize the sinners' conduct, or way of life. Not only do they murder, but they refuse to repent of their murders (Rev 9:21) and have pleasure in others who murder (1:29-32). Destruction and misery speak of the oppression that they enjoy bringing on others (3:16). They are quarrelsome in their very nature, not knowing the way of peace.

3. By a corrupt cause — 3:18

3:18 — Paul quoted Psalm 36:1 to say the wicked person has no fear of God in his eyes. The eyes speak of a person's spiritual vision whose natural condition fails to see God with proper fear. Solomon said the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 9:10).

Up to this point, Paul has proved that all people are committing acts of sin; in chapter 5, he will deal with their original sin nature which causes these acts of sin (5:12ff).

C. The Conclusion Reaffirmed — 3:19-20

3:19 — Paul used the Old Testament for two purposes. First, to expressly show to the Jews that they were under the condemnation of God's judgment. The Jews' mouths were stopped which indicates that every excuse that they could use to escape God's judgment had been answered. Second, since the self-righteous Jew had his mouth stopped, the Gentile's mouth certainly would be stopped. The entire human race was guilty (condemned) before God.

3:20 — Two facts are given about the law in this verse. The first fact is that no one can be justified by obeying His law, because every demand of the law would need to be obeyed all throughout one's entire life. No one has kept all the commands of His law. God knows everything we do and think. If we break one command, He knows it and it is recorded in a book. We are guilty of breaking His law many times before we realize it. This is not a contradiction of the justification principle in 2:13, which refers to the obedience of believers. Here it refers to unbelievers that cannot be justified for salvation by keeping God's law. The second fact about the law of God is to show us how we have sinned against Him. It is the grace of God to show how we have offended Him, so we can see why we need to be reconciled to Him by the death of Christ in our place on the cross.

III. Justification by Faith Communicated — 3:21-31

A. Disclosure of God's Righteousness — 3:21-22

3:21-22 — "But now" – Paul has painted a dreadful picture of our spiritual darkness, condemned by the law for our wicked sins against God (1:18-3:20). "But now" he begins to paint another picture of light and life for all people who are justified by the righteousness of God (3:21-8:39). His righteousness is manifest without (apart from) the Law to all who have faith in Jesus Christ. This righteousness cannot be earned by any merit acquired from the deeds of the Law. This righteousness was witnessed by the Law and the prophets. The law demanded the need of innocent blood to be shed by its sacrificial system (Heb 9:22) and it required faith in God (Gen 15:6). The prophets gave witness to the death and resurrection of Christ (Ps 2:7 with Acts 13:33; Ps 16:10-11 with Acts 2:27-28; Isa 53:3-11).

"Unto all" — The righteousness of God is offered unto all people, not limited to a select few (1 Jn 2:2).

"Upon all" — This righteousness, which provides justification, is upon all who receive it by faith in Jesus Christ's vicarious work on the cross and by His victorious resurrection from the grave.

B. Deprivation of God's Righteousness — 3:22-23

Romans 3:22-23 is a parenthesis describing a sinner's need of God's righteousness. Without God's gift of righteousness, he or she is not able to attain the glory of God.

3:22 — "There is no difference" – There is no ethnic distinction in God's righteousness. God treats Jews and Gentiles alike. He receives those that receive His Son; but He rejects those that reject His Son.

3:23 — "All have sinned" – The past tense of the verb collects each person's sin into a collective whole. Everyone is included in this rebellion against God.

"Come short of the glory of God" — The apostles saw the glory of God in His Son (Jn 1:14). What did they see? They saw His sinlessness. When Peter, James, and John saw the glory of His sinlessness on the Mount of Transfiguration, they knew they had fallen far short of it (Mt 17:1-2). By faith in Christ, we have been given a new nature (2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9-10; 2 Pet 1:4). As we mature in our spiritual life, we will be changed into the image of Jesus Christ from glory to glory as we submit to the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18). Finally, when we see our Savior in Heaven, we shall be like Him (1 Jn 3:2).

C. Declaration of God's Righteousness — 3:24

3:24 — This verse resumes the thought begun in 3:22 which describes a righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

"Justification" — Justification was introduced in 3:21-22. It is God's declaration that a sinner is righteous. How can a holy God do this to wicked sinners? God chose His Son, Jesus Christ, who knew no sin, and placed the sins of all people on Him. Since He was sinless and had no sin of His own to pay, He was able to pay the penalty for the sins of the whole world in all ages, past, present and future. When He was raised from the dead by His Father, it proved He was fully satisfied with the redemptive payment that His Son made. Now we receive God's righteousness when we place our faith in His Son's sacrificial blood for our sins (1:17; Eph 2:13). Even though we still sin, God sees Christ's blood shed for our sins and He is able to declare us righteous. That is how we are justified.

"Freely" — Justification is freely given to us when we receive His Son by faith as our Savior. It cannot be earned by the deeds of the flesh (cf. 3:20); a person that is justified by God has the righteousness of God.

"Grace" — This refers to God's benevolent goodwill in making His righteousness available to us without our good works.

"Redemption" — This refers to the price that Jesus Christ paid for our sins (1 Pet 1:18-19). It was a very costly payment. It required His blood to be shed and the excruciating pain He suffered by whips slashing His back and tearing out chunks of His flesh, by a crown with needle-like thorns jammed on His head, by nails piercing His hands and feet, by suffocation as He struggled for every breath of air as He hung on the cross, and by extreme thirst from the loss of blood. By His death we are set free from the penalty of our sins when we accept His payment for them. That fearful penalty of sin is to be cast into the Lake of Fire forever. We also are set free from the shackles of sins that have bound us. Christ saves us from our sin, not to live in our sin. We are to live like the Lord, not to live like the world. We do not draw sinners to Christ by being like them, but being like Christ (cp. 2 Cor 6:17-7:1; 1 Pet 2:21-24; 1 Jn 2:15-17). We must show that we are redeemed.

D. Demonstration of God's Righteousness — 3:25-26

3:25 — "Propitiation" – Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins. He propitiated (satisfied) the holy wrath of God against sin. How did Jesus Christ do this? He took all our sins, died for them in our place on the cross, and buried them in the grave. Now by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross, we can draw near to God, call Him our Father, and have affectionate fellowship with Him.

How is Christ's propitiation different than His redemption? Christ's redemption sets us free from our bondage to the Law so we can serve Him (Gal 3:13), while His propitiation appeases the holy wrath of God so we can be forgiven from all our sins; He is our Advocate with the Father (1 Jn 1:7; 2:1-2; 4:10). Notice that God took the initiative to provide the propitiation for our sins by sending His Son to die publicly on the cross. So, God is the author of propitiation, Christ's shed blood is the means of propitiation, but it is realized only through the agency of our faith. Notice, the blood of Christ and our faith in Christ is needed so that God can be satisfied.

"To declare His righteousness" — God would be righteous if He judged all people that sinned against Him and sent them to Hell, but no one would be spared from His holy wrath. Instead, He spared sinners in Old Testament times from His wrath if they offered Him animal sacrifices for their sins. Since animal sacrifices could not fully satisfy His requirement for righteousness, He could not declare them to be righteous. Then God sent His sinless Son to die for the sins of all people. His death propitiated God's wrath (1 Jn 2:2; Heb 2:9). Christ's death for our sin satisfied God's judgment for sin so He could declare us to be righteous.

"Remission" — The Greek word really means "having previously occurred" (perfect participle) and the phrase would be translated "passing over sins having previously occurred." Before Christ died on the cross to propitiate God's wrath, God passed over the sins of Old Testament believers by having them offer sacrifices of lambs and other clean animals. They were saved on "credit" until John the Baptist announced the appearance of the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). He would propitiate the wrath of God for all sins in the past, present and future, when He died on the cross for all sinners. However, only those that receive Christ by faith can have this blessing.

"Forbearance" — God hated sin in Old Testament times as He does now, but He exercised patience in punishing sin because they did not have all the blessings that Christ has provided for us.

Notice the distinctions mentioned above with reference to redemption and propitiation. Redemption provides the payment that God demands for our sins, while propitiation provides a vindication of God's demands to satisfy His righteousness. These truths apply only to those who have faith in Christ.

3:26 — "He might be just and the justifier" – God who knows the hearts of all men, moved among the rebellious Jews to demand that Christ be publicly put to death on a Roman cross. This was important to openly demonstrate to the world that He was just and righteous in justifying sinners that put their faith in Jesus Christ. It made no difference if they were moral or immoral, because Christ paid for their sins by dying in their place. Christ was the recipient of God's holy wrath which all sinners deserve. Also, He was the justifier of sinners that believed in Jesus because they were given the righteousness of God in Christ, who never sinned (2 Cor 5:21).

E. Defense of God's Righteousness — 3:27-31

1. It excludes all boasting — 3:27-28

3:27-28 — The Gospel excludes all boasting among saved sinners. When sinners receive Jesus Christ's work as the only basis for their salvation, it excludes boasting through the law of faith. How? If sinners are justified (declared righteous) by their works, they can boast, but if they are justified only by means of faith in Christ's works, there is no ground for boasting (Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8-9). Justification by our works would produce pride. Justification by Christ's works produces humility. When we get to Heaven, all boasting will go to the Lamb of God (Rev 5:9-14).

2. It includes everyone — 3:29-30

3:29-30 — God is the God of everyone, not only of the Jews, but also the Gentiles. He is the only true God for the entire world. He made the world and He rules the world, because it is His world. There is only one God that is assaulted by the sins of the world and only one God that can remove these sins and bring peace to the world. Everyone must humble themselves before God and accept His condition for peace or be destroyed by His wrath. His condition for peace is to receive by faith the sacrifice of His Son for their sins so He can declare them righteous.

3. It establishes the law — 3:31

3:31 — Although salvation is by faith alone, the Law is not nullified, but it is established in at least two ways. First, the Law is established in its purpose of showing all people that they are sinners and in need of salvation (3:20). Second, the Law is established because it demands a blood sacrifice to atone for sin. Only Christ's shed blood on the cross can atone for sin to satisfy God's holy demands for the punishment of our sins. On the basis of our faith in the shed blood of Christ, God can declare sinners to be righteous. In this sense, Christ fulfilled the Law (Mt 5:17).