

Getting It Right: Part 2

Romans 3:21-31

March 6, 2011

Last week we looked at the gospel. We saw that God gives His righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Paul then unpacked that statement and filled us in on how it happens. This week we continue with Paul's description of the gospel through one of its implications for the church in Rome, and for us as well.

Going back to previous weeks, you will remember that Paul's concern was to point out that everybody is in the same despicable position before God. Without the gospel there is no hope because nobody is worthy to be in God's presence. Beyond that, nobody actually wants to be in His presence. We may want His blessings. We may want eternal life. Without the Holy Spirit working in our hearts, however, we do not want Him. Regardless of our background or ethnic roots, whether we are Jew or Gentile, no matter the color of our skin or our history, we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus and His blood shed as a sacrifice on our behalf, or we are not saved at all.

The question comes up then, "Why?" Why did God choose to punish Jesus on our behalf? How is it that Jesus' death can provide forgiveness for **me**? We left off with the first half of verse 25. Look with me at the second half of that verse, and the following one. "*He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the*

present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." (vv.25,26)

At first glance this does not make sense. Indeed, some have rejected it on that basis. What is just about the Father sending Jesus to the cross to pay the penalty for our sin? It would not be just if Jesus were otherwise unconnected to our relationship with the Father and yet was compelled to pay our penalty. As God the Son, however, our offense is against Jesus, just as much as it is against the Father. In addition, Jesus was a **willing** sacrifice. He came to the earth knowing what was going to happen and He willingly went through with it. Jesus often talked about His coming death. At one time He said, "*The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*" (John 10:17,18) Another time Jesus said, "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" (Mark 10:45)

Jesus was not some poor victim grabbed at random off of the street and made to bear the punishment for our sin. He is God the Son who volunteered to pay the penalty we owe so that He and the Father and Holy Spirit would be glorified. His death on the cross demonstrates God's love and mercy as well as His righteousness, judgement, and wrath. It is proof that God takes sin seriously.

God offered Jesus as a sacrifice on our behalf to demonstrate His **justice**. And not on our behalf only, but also on behalf of everyone who has ever believed in Him and trusted Him for their salvation. Even under the old covenant, the sacrifices made on the altar did not really

provide forgiveness. The life of a lamb or a bull is nowhere near valuable enough to make restitution for our sins. The author of Hebrews said of Jesus and the old sacrifices, *“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.”*

(Hebrews 10:11.12) Because of the inability of the sacrificial system, God delayed punishing the sins of those who trusted in Him under it. The punishment for their sins, as for all who believe, fell on Jesus on the cross. God is patient and He works His plan out in His time. All the **sins** that will ever be forgiven are covered by Jesus’ shed blood.

In this way, God’s justice is fulfilled. All humans are deserving of death. God chooses to save some, and so provides a means of salvation through the death of His Son, who does not deserve death, but offers Himself willingly. The Father accepts Jesus’ sacrifice on behalf of all who believe. Thus, God is both just, punishing sin, and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus.

So then, can we boast about our history or the relationship of our people with God? Absolutely not! There is nothing on which we can **boast**. We have not obeyed the law. We are no better than anybody else on the planet. We realize that we are just as bad as everybody else, and so we stand amazed before God that He would choose to save us from our sin, draw us to Himself, and give us eternal life. Boasting is excluded because our justification before God has nothing to do with us. It is all about **Jesus**. We had no more to do

with our new birth into life in God than we had to do with our birth into this world. As Paul said, *“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”* (v.28) God is not the God of only the Jews, or Europeans, or Africans, or Asians, or Pacific Islanders, or any other group you may care to name. He is the God of the entire world and all who come to Him must come to Him the same way—through faith.

After carefully showing how everybody, Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, stands guilty before God, Paul now reminds us of the clear implication of the fact that salvation is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. He writes, *“[T]here is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”* (v.30) Some people make a point that Paul used two different prepositions for the two groups. It is probably just stylistic. If there is significance in it, it is very minor, because Paul’s whole point in this letter up to this sentence has been that the circumcised and the uncircumcised come to God in exactly the same way. Earlier he said there is no difference. It seems unwarranted to seek to tease out a difference now.

All who come to God are justified through **faith**. We are not justified by trying to do our best. We are not justified by coming to church on Sundays. We are not justified by being better than our neighbors. We are not justified by giving money. We are not justified by taking communion. We are justified by placing our faith—our trust and hope—in Jesus and His blood shed on the cross. And we are only justified by that faith. It is the only way to God. It is the only way to life.