

Justification by Grace through Faith Alone

Exegetical Study Romans 3:21–28

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THE TEXT (KJV)

But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;²² Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:²³ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;²⁴ Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:²⁵ Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness because of the passing by of past sins²⁶, in the forbearance of God, to declare at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.²⁷ Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.²⁸ Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

INTRODUCTION

After a greeting and stating his desire to come to Rome (1:1–15), Paul summarizes the whole epistle in two verses (1:16–17). Then follows a lengthy section on man's sin and God's consequent wrath because of sin (1:18–3:20). Left to himself, man's condition is hopeless. "Therefore," says Paul, "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law comes the knowledge of sin" (3:20). At this point (3:21) begins the lengthy section on justification by grace through faith alone (3:21–5:21).

In the Formula of Concord, Epitome, Good Works (Tappert 474.7) we read:

We believe, teach, and confess that if we would preserve the pure doctrine concerning the righteousness of faith before God, we must give special attention to the exclusive terms, that is, to those words of the holy apostle Paul which separate the merit of Christ completely from our own works and give all glory to Christ alone. Thus the holy apostle Paul uses such expressions as "by grace", "without merit", "without the law", "not by works", etc. All these expressions say in effect that we become righteous and are saved "alone by faith" in Christ.¹

Note the exclusive terms in this text: "apart from law" [χωρὶς νόμου], v. 21; "through faith" [διὰ πίστεως] vv. 22, 25; "by His grace" [τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι] v. 24; "through the redemption" [διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως], v. 24; "by or out of faith" [ἐκ πίστεως], v. 26. Salvation by works or merit and salvation by grace through faith are mutually exclusive. Note how emphatic the exclusive particle "by works of the law" [ἐξ ἔργων νόμου] is in verse 20. And note also the similarity between verses 21 and 28 in this text. Both have the exclusive particle "apart from works" [χωρὶς ἔργων] in common.

Verse 21: But now [Νυνὶ] the righteousness of God [δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ] without the law [χωρὶς νόμου] is manifested [πεφανέρωται], being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

On "now" [Νυνὶ], Bengel rightly says, "Now introduces the antithesis, but includes the idea of time."² Franzmann notes, "It is the 'now' of the time of God's favor, the 'now' of the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2)."³ Note the emphatic position of "apart from law" [χωρὶς νόμου] which, in the original, is set forward in the sentence. Here "law" [νόμου] denotes the Mosaic law (or any other code of ethics) which says "do" and "don't do" to man.

Here "righteousness" [δικαιοσύνη] has the same meaning as in 1:17, namely, the imputed righteousness of Christ. The genitive θεοῦ is a genitive of source or origin, meaning that the righteousness which is imputed to man comes from God. In itself, this phrase, "the righteousness of God", strongly excludes works, for as all linguistic scholarship attests, δικαιοσύνη is a purely forensic term, i.e., the verdict of the judge is "not guilty." Stoeckhardt remarks, "This righteousness of God rests outside of us in God, in God's judgment, and so is as firm and immovable as God Himself . . . He whom God declares righteous is righteous, even though all the world and all devils condemn him, even though his own conscience pronounces him guilty and judges him."⁴

Πεφανέρωται [has been revealed] is a perfect passive verb that expresses a punctiliar durative force. That is to say, the righteousness of God has been revealed, once for all time (i.e., punctiliar), in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and continues to be revealed (durative). Where? In the Law and the Prophets. This, of course, designates the entire Old Testament. This phrase removes all danger of supposing that the apostle was speaking of a righteousness which was opposed or strange to the Old Testament. "The apostle," Stoeckhardt says, "does not refer merely to such passages of the Old Testament which mention that righteousness, as Gen. 15:6; Hab 2:4, but especially to the prophecy of the Old Covenant concerning Christ and salvation in Christ."⁵

On this verse, the Apology says, "Paul says, 'Now, the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from Law' (Rom. 3;21), that is, the forgiveness of sins is offered freely. Reconciliation does not depend upon our merits."⁶ Note here that forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation are used as synonyms for the righteousness of God. This cannot be stressed enough. Recall that Luther at first conceived of the righteousness of God in terms of His punitive righteousness, a righteousness by which God judges sinners according to the Law. But note that this is Gospel—and nothing but Gospel!

Verse 22: Even [δὲ]the righteousness of God [δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ] which is by faith of Jesus Christ [διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ] unto all them that believe [εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας] for there is no difference [οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν διαστολή]:

This verse is an emphatic expansion of v. 21. The conjunction δὲ is expegetical and has the force of "namely." The righteousness of God is again under consideration, and here we are told (1) how it is received, and (2) who receives it. As to the manner of reception of God's imputed righteousness, we are told that it is appropriated "through faith of Jesus Christ" [διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ]. The genitive "of Jesus Christ" must be objective, so that it has the sense "through faith in, or in connection with Jesus Christ." It obviously cannot be a subjective genitive, or else we would have "through faith by Jesus Christ" . . . clearly not a correct sense. As to whom appropriates this righteousness, Paul writes that it is extended "unto all those who believe" [εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας]. Note that the participle πιστεύοντας is in the present tense. This means that only those who possess faith—as a present reality—receive the righteousness pronounced by God. This, of course, destroys the Calvinistic notion of *once in grace, always in grace*, for Paul would have used the aorist participle if he had intended to teach that faith, once possessed, is the critical matter. But Paul says here that faith, as a current possession, appropriates righteousness. The main thought here is that only believers benefit from God's righteousness in Christ. It does not mean that God in Christ redeemed only believers.

The last four words, "for there is no difference" have caused some Lutheran commentators difficulty. The question is: To whom does this lack of difference pertain? Arndt and Stoeckhardt take it to mean that there is no distinction among believers. Bengel, Franzmann, and Lenski, take it to mean that there is no distinction among people in general. This seems to be the best sense. All people are accused by the Law in precisely the same way; all are justified in exactly the same way, *viz.*, through faith alone in Christ Jesus.

Verse 23: For all have sinned [πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον], and come short [καὶ ὑστεροῦνται] of the glory of God [τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ].

This verse is a *locus classicus* on the universality of sin. "All have sinned" means that men and women of all ages have sinned. No one is excepted save Jesus Christ. Note that Rome's doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception, whereby she is pronounced free of original sin—and the actual sins that flow from it—is destroyed in this passage.

And what is the result or consequence of committing such actual sins? The inspired apostle writes "they come short of the glory of God" [καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ]. The verb ὑστεροῦνται means "to lack." Thus sinners lack—completely lack anything that would gain God's favor. What do sinners lack? Paul says they lack τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ, "the glory of God." But what is the meaning of "glory" in this passage? On this, consider "glory" in John 5:41–44:

I do not receive glory [δόξα] from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another shall come in his own name you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory [δόξα] from one another, and you do not seek the glory [τὴν δόξαν] that is from the one and only God?⁷

In our text and in John 5, the word glory has the sense of approval. Arndt says, "Man at first had this glory of God. But through sin this glory was lost." Lenski says,

Δόξα has no connection with God's own essential glory; it is not the glory of heaven, not the divine image in which man was created, and not καύχησις, glorying before God. The word is used in its very first meaning: "good opinion" (Abbott–Smith).⁸

The genitive "of God" is either a genitive of origin or a subjective genitive. In either case, the meaning is clear: The approval of God which sinners lack (completely lack!) must come from God Himself. Note how this verse is entirely Law. It must drive us to our knees and the Gospel, here in our text, the "righteousness of God."

Verse 24: Being justified [δικαιούμενοι] freely [δωρεάν] by his grace [τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι] through the redemption [διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως] that is in Christ Jesus:

How is the sinner to acquire the approval or δόξα of God? Paul gives the answer. Everything is God's doing: "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." The first thing the apostle mentions is justification. Note that we have here the passive participle δικαιούμενοι, the agent of which is God. That is to say, justification is not something declared by the sinner, but something which is declared by God. Second, we notice the adverb δωρεάν (freely, gratis—from God). Δωρεὰ is a gift or bounty from God. Continuing, we see the

great *causa interna* of our justification, namely "by His grace" [τῆ αὐτοῦ χάριτι]. God's grace is the moving cause which lays behind the incarnation, Christ's humiliation, the vicarious atonement and reconciliation. Redemption, ἀπολύτρωσις, is one of the great words of Holy Scripture. Behind it lay the cognate form λύτρον [ransom]. Regarding redemption, Lenski writes:

The sense of ἀπολύτρωσις is most adequately supported by synonymous terms: ἀγοράζειν, "to buy," I Cor. 6:20; 7:23; ἐξαγοραζειν, "to buy up," (as when a slave is ransomed), Gal. 3:13; περιποιέσθαι, "to purchase," Acts 20:28; λυτροῦσθαι, "to ransom," Tit. 2:14. Especially instructive are Matt. 20:28 and Mark 10:45, where Jesus speaks of giving his life as a ransom or λύτρον; and I Tim. 2:6, ἀντίλυτρον, his "ransom in place" of all.⁹

Clearly, this verse is all Gospel. The exclusive terms are placed before us throughout this text at every juncture.

Verse 25: Whom God hath set forth [προέθετο] to be a propitiation [ἱλαστήριον] through faith [διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως] in his blood [ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι], to declare his righteousness [εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης] because of the passing by [πάρεσιν] of past sins;

What does Paul now say about Christ? He says that God put him forward [προέθετο]. This verb is the aorist middle of προτίθημι, variously translated as "set forth", "put forward", "offered", and "publicly set forth". What all these translations have in common is that God has plainly made His Son, Jesus, known as the ἱλαστήριον [propitiation]. The commentaries point out that ἱλαστήριον in the Old Testament is the LXX translation of the Hebrew *kapporoth* for the lid on the Ark of the Covenant. Exodus 25:17–22 is instructive for its significance as a type of Christ. This cover covered the Ten Commandments in the Ark. Christ thus covers our sin. This cover was the place where God and sinful man met.

The translators struggle with the Greek ἱλαστήριον. Some translate it as expiation, some as propitiation, some as an atoning sacrifice. Propitiation is best because it alone carries the sense that God's wrath over against sin has been fully satisfied in Christ.

The propitiation, Paul now informs us, is a propitiation "by His blood." It is only Christ's blood that is meritorious. The phrase διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως [through faith] does not modify propitiation as if there were no redemption apart from faith. It tells how this propitiation is made effective in the sinner. It is effective individually when each sinner abandons faith in his own merits, substituting for this, faith which has Christ as its object, faith which is divinely worked.

For what purpose did God set forth His Son as a propitiation? The apostle says that He did so "to declare [or show] His righteousness". Lutheran commentators, for the most part, take "righteousness" to mean God's essential righteousness. Stoeckhardt is representative. He writes:

God set forth His Son as a propitiation in order *to declare His righteousness*. By inflicting a violent death upon His Son, by shedding Christ's blood for the atonement of sins, God wanted to manifest His righteousness; and by presenting Christ in His blood and wounds before the eyes of men, to set forth His righteousness before the world. This righteousness, however, is not the righteousness which avails before God, but an essential attribute of God. It is the righteousness of God by which He rewards every one according to his works and which shows itself over against the transgressors of the law as punitive righteousness.¹⁰

Arndt, Bengel, Kretzmann, and Franzmann agree with Stoeckhardt. Only Lenski disagrees. He sees "righteousness" here as the imputed righteousness of God. A case can be made for either position, but the opinion of the majority seems to fit the context best.

The propitiation, as we have seen, took place to display God's justice—i.e., sin had to be paid for. The propitiation also took place, Paul says, to make clear that God had "passed by" [πάρεσιν] sin previously committed. Πάρεσιν is a difficult word since it is a *hapax legomenon*. But it is helpful to note that its cognate verb is πάρειμι which means "to let pass." This passing by of sins does not mean that God was permissive or that men were not held responsible. Arndt remarks:

God formerly had let sins go by without punishing them. That might have created the impression that He was not just. But when His appointed time had arrived, He did punish every sin. God was forbearing and postponing the meting out of punishment in the time of the Old Testament. He waited until Christ came who bore all penalties.¹¹

We should, therefore, be clear that God's "passing by" is not meant to minimize sin's enormity and man's culpability, but rather to magnify the saving grace of God, the vicarious shedding of Jesus' blood, and the imputed righteousness of God in Christ. We should also note that Old Testament sinners were saved in the same way as New Testament sinners, namely, through faith alone in the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (cf. Rev. 13:8). Old Testament saints looked forward in time to the coming of the promised Messiah. We New Testament saints look backward in time to the accomplished fact.

Verse 26: in the forbearance of God [ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ], to declare his righteousness [πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ] at this time [ἐν τῷ νῦν

καίρω]: that he might be just [εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον], and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

Paul now explains the "passing by" of the previous verse. Such passing by was ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ [in the forbearance of God]. That is to say, God was patient. Patience, we should note, is not the same as grace. Patience defers punishment; grace completely suspends it.¹² It is God who defers the punishment until Calvary.

Next Paul reaches back to verse 25 and once again answers the question as to why God set forth His Son as a propitiation. Previously he had said that it was a demonstration of His punitive justice which caused Him to pour out His wrath upon His Son. Now the apostle views the setting forth of Christ from a different perspective. Christ was set forth πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ, i.e., for the demonstration of His righteousness. This phrase is nearly a duplicate of that of verse 25. But we have an important difference. The righteousness spoken of here is not God's punitive righteousness (Law righteousness), but His imputed righteousness (Gospel righteousness), i.e., the righteousness of Christ which is accounted to sinners through faith alone in the merits of the Savior.

That this is the correct view is seen from what follows. In verse 25, we had a demonstration of His righteousness in connection with the passing over of previously committed sins. Here, we have the antithesis, namely, a demonstration of His righteousness in connection with the great "now" of Christ, that is—to us Paul's own words—in connection with τῷ νῦν καιρῷ [the present time]. Καιρὸς, as always, denotes not just chronological time, but the "pregnant time" of God's great salvific grace toward man.

Next, Paul has a purpose clause (εἰς το + infinitive). The purpose of the propitiation has a twofold perspective. According to the Law, God is just, punishing Christ for sin. According to the Gospel, however, God is gracious, justifying the sinner. We have, in this clause both thoughts beautifully expressed. Note how Paul says it: [God put Christ forward] "in order that He might be just [Law] and the justifier [Gospel] of him who has faith in Jesus." In the term "justifier" (the anarthrous participle δικαιοῦντα) we have the forensic sense. The phrase "him who has faith in Jesus) is an exclusive term, i.e., only he who has faith is declared righteous by God. This is the Reformation's great *sola fide!* Works are absolutely excluded in the consideration of justification. Why does Paul say τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. (literally, him who is of faith in Jesus) and not the more normal τὸν πιστεύοντα (him who believes)? Probably because the former is a stronger expression excluding works.

Verse 27: Where is boasting then? It is excluded [ἐξεκλείσθη]. By what law [διὰ ποίου νόμου;] of works? Nay [οὐχι]: but by the law of faith.

Paul then asks, "Where is boasting?" He answers: "It is excluded [ἐξεκλείσθη ἀποριστ πασσίε οφ εκκλειω]. The exclusion is most forceful, for the verb is εκκλειω, an intensive form of κλειω (meaning to "shut out"). Διὰ ποίου νόμου;, literally, "through what law?" This has the sense of "by what principle?" That is, by what principle is boasting excluded? "Of works?" he asks. "Never [ουχι]!" he replies. But if not on the principle of works, then by what principle? He replies, "By the principle of faith." Once again, *sola fide!*

Verse 28: Therefore we conclude [λογιζομεθα] that a man is justified [δικαιουσθαι] by faith [πιστει] without the deeds of the law [χωρισ εργων νομου].

This verse is a *locus classicus* on justification. In the word "reckon" or "conclude" [λογιζομαι] we have the imputation. The infinitive δικαιουσθαι ["to be justified"] is forensic. Note that it is a passive infinitive with God as the agent behind the action or declaration of "Not guilty!" Faith [πιστει] as used here is the dative of means, i.e., faith is the instrumental cause of our justification. Faith appropriates the righteousness of Christ. "Apart from the works of the law" is an exclusive term shutting out human works.

No wonder that Luther insisted that it was very Scriptural to use the term "alone" in the doctrine of justification. We remember that the Church of Rome taught salvation by grace. But it was horrified that the reformers taught salvation by grace alone. Rome taught salvation by grace and the cooperating good works of man. It may rightly be said that the Reformation was fought over one word, *sola!* And *sola* rings through the words of this text in the exclusive terms. So it is without apology that we remember anew the importance of the three pillars of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura! Sola Gratia! Sola Fide!*

Soli Deo Gloria!

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