

We are in the fourth week of a six week series exploring Romans 8:29-30 which you heard again in our first reading this morning. We have looked at foreknowledge, predestination, and calling. Today we look at justification and next week glorification.

By way of review, God is the subject of this passage and it is God taking the action. God foreknew and predestined His elect before the foundation of the world. At some point in each elect person's life God calls him or her with an effectual, irresistible call through the gospel of Jesus Christ. That call is accompanied by regeneration from the Holy Spirit and the gift of faith in Christ from God the Father so that each and every called person will come to life in Christ. All of those steps lead to justification.

Those whom God foreknew He predestined, and those He predestined He called and those He called He also justified.

I want to start with the simplest definition of justification that I can come up with.

Justification is a declaration by God that a person has been made forever right and acceptable to Himself.

God declares that a person is in right standing before God. It is like a legal determination rendered by God which can never be overturned. I have mentioned before in this series that God is perfectly just and that His actions and decisions will never compromise His character. In the matter of declaring a sinful person made right, the problem for God is that His justice cannot be violated. Or put another way, how can a just God justify a sinful man and still be just?

Socrates who died 400 years before Christ, is quoted as saying, "It may be that the Deity can forgive sins, but I do not see how,"

Now justification is not forgiveness exactly, but you cannot understand justification unless you understand the terrible nature of sin. God is holy. He cannot abide sin. God is just. Sin must be punished or atoned for. God must be propitiated or satisfied because all sin is against God. But God is also loving and merciful. Perhaps Socrates understood that. Perhaps Socrates could see that God in His mercy would like to forgive sins, but that God's holiness and justice would be

violated if He did so. So he said, maybe God can forgive sins but I do not see how.

But God knew how. In fact God planned it from the beginning. And 400 years after Socrates died, God's answer to his dilemma was made manifest.

Open your Bibles if you will to Romans chapter 3. Romans chapter 3 beginning in verse 21. Paul is speaking of this very problem. Until Christ, God's righteousness was visible in the law. But the law could not justify anyone because no one could keep it. Here in Romans 3 the relationship between sin, sacrifice, atonement, mercy, love, grace, faith, justice, and righteousness is made clear.

Rom 3:21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it--

Rom 3:22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

Rom 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Rom 3:24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Rom 3:25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Rom 3:26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Rom 3:27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.

Rom 3:28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Rom 3:23 for all have sinned ...

Rom 3:24 and are justified by God's grace ... through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Rom 3:25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, ...

3:26 ... so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Do you see it coming together? All have sinned. Those who are justified are justified by God's grace as a gift that is given through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Jesus is the propitiation that satisfies God's holy justice. So that when it is all put together, God can justify those with faith in Jesus and still be just.

God cannot ignore sin because He is holy. God cannot let sin go unpunished because He is just. Sin is so terrible that we can not ever pay the price ourselves. If we live forever and only do good works, those works can never make up for the terrible wrong done to God by even one sin. There is only one way that sinners can be declared righteous by God without compromising the character of God. And that is through Jesus Christ.

Listen to this poem by Albert Midlane.

The perfect righteousness of God
Is witnessed in the Savior's blood;
'Tis in the cross of Christ we trace
His righteousness, yet wondrous grace.
God could not pass the sinner by,
His sin demands that he must die;
But in the cross of Christ we see
How God can save, yet righteous be.
The sin is on the Savior laid,
'Tis in His blood sin's debt is paid;
Stern justice can demand no more,
And mercy can dispense her store.
The sinner who believes is free,
Can say, "The Savior died for me";
Can point to the atoning blood,
And say, "That made my peace with God."

Do you see it all tied together? God's righteousness, the Savior's blood shed on the cross, God's grace, the terrible nature of sin that God cannot overlook. Jesus Christ taking it all on Himself, bearing our sins away, paying our debt. God's justice is satisfied. God's mercy is set free. And every sinner who confesses Christ as his or her personal Savior can point to that blood, to Jesus' death, and say, "That made my peace with God."
Oh glory. Glory.

There are some things that need to be made clear in this Romans 3 passage. First, Paul wrote in verse 25 that God put forward Jesus Christ as a propitiation by his blood. I want you to understand that God is not some malevolent vengeful spirit who can only be satiated by cruel torture. There are many who think that way. Most of the pagan gods have those characteristics. But not the true living God. Propitiation is not the placating of a vengeful God but, rather, it satisfies the righteousness of a holy God. And that in turn makes it possible for God to show mercy without compromising His righteousness or justice.

John Stott writes that propitiation "does not make God gracious...God does not love us because Christ died for us, Christ died for us because God loves us" (The Cross of Christ p.174).

Another possibly confusing part of this Romans passage is the second half of verse 25. God put forward Christ as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. And then Paul writes, this was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

This makes it sound as if God used to ignore sin but that is not so. Neither does it mean that God once accepted animal sacrifice but then decided it wasn't good enough. Some people erroneously teach that the Jews were saved by animal sacrifice. In fact, this verse teaches the opposite. You see it was God looking ahead to the perfect sacrifice on the cross that let Him postpone judgment on the sins of the Old Testament believers. Those believers look ahead to the cross just as we look back to the cross. Please understand this. If Jesus did not die on the cross, no person would have ever been saved and it does not matter when that person was born.

Animal sacrifice was to point the way to the perfect sacrifice. It was an illustration of what the Messiah would provide. And the salvation of those people born before Christ was found the same way as our salvation. That is in the grace of God through the redemption in Christ which is appropriated by faith. So what Paul is saying is that the atoning death of Christ proves that God was righteous to temporarily pass over those sins committed in the past because God saw them paid for at the cross just as surely as if it had already happened. So Paul can write that the death of Christ was to show God's

righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins and that it was to show God's righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

There is a verse that is found in Habakkuk, Galatians, Hebrews, and here in Romans that says it all. The just shall live by faith. Or the righteous shall live by faith.

And that leads to another point that we must be clear on. That is the idea of imputed righteousness. You see, we are not righteous because we believe in Jesus as if we have done something. Nor are we righteous in ourselves. We have not earned righteousness by having faith. What has happened is that God has reckoned or accounted the righteousness of Christ to our account. We stand in His righteousness, not ours. It is in Christ that we are justified and not on our own.

The Bible speaks of some just or righteous individuals but not in this sense. There are people who are righteous people by human standards but that is not the source of justification. No one can stand in his or her own righteousness before God.

Isaiah wrote that (Isa 64:6) "... all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment."

So God does not bestow salvation or justification upon us because of something we do. Rather He counts our faith as righteousness in Christ. He credits our account with the righteousness of Jesus. There is a wonderful illustration of that idea here in Romans 3. Because you see, the word propitiation is the same word that means mercy seat. The ark of the covenant had a lid on it that is called the mercy seat. In Greek it is the very same word that is rendered propitiation.

So what, you say? Ah, but listen. In the Holy of Holies - the inmost room of the tabernacle and later the temple - stood the ark of the covenant. And in the ark were the stone tablets written on by the finger of God and delivered down the mountain by Moses. Those tablets contain what we call the ten commandments. They are in the ark. The ark is covered by the mercy seat. On the ends of the mercy seat are two gold angels with their wings arched toward each other. And there between the angels above the mercy seat God met with

Moses. That is where the glory of God appeared.

(Lev 16)

And once a year on the day of atonement, the high priest was to enter that most holy place to make atonement for himself and the people.

The high priest would offer a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering and then he was to do a rather strange thing.

He was to take two male goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tabernacle. And there the high priest would cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for a scapegoat. And the priest would present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD as a sin offering, but the scapegoat was presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel.

So here is how it worked. The priest would take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on mercy seat seven times. And he would kill the goat of the sin offering and do the same with its blood, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. This was to make atonement. And when that is done, he presents the live goat and lays his hands on its head, and confesses over it all the sins of the people. He would put those sins on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness. So the goat would bear away all their iniquities.

Now consider Christ at the cross. He is represented by both of these goats you see. He is at once our atonement, dying to pay for our sins, and he is also the one who bears away our sins. Those are two very distinct things. He paid a price that was sufficient for all the sins of all the people of all time - but only those who place their faith in Him have their sins born away and remembered no more.

Everything in the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ. God provided His only begotten Son to pay the price of redemption and to carry away the sins of those who believe. He paid the penalty and He bore the burden. And by doing so He satisfied God's holiness, and God's justice, so that God's mercy could flow down in His grace and justify the sinner who is in Christ Jesus.

Look at the picture of that ark in the holy of holies. There is God, looking down through the blood stained propitiation at His broken law on the tablets of stone.

And at the cross is God looking down through His blood stained Son at us who have broken His holy law. And God counts Christ's righteousness to our account. He looks at those who believe through His Son.

And we stand in that grace not by any work that we could possibly do, but by faith in what Jesus did on the cross. There is no boasting there my friends. Only repentance. And if the Holy Spirit is convicting you today of your sin, then confess it to God. Repent. Turn from your sin and turn to the Lord who died for you. This may be the day God calls you from darkness to light. Answer the call of God and be justified.