

The Righteousness of God

A Consideration of Romans 3:21-26 and its Presentation of Justification

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. 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.

Setting:

An easy perhaps over-simplified breakdown of the ground covered will provide an appropriate approach to this magnificent and majestic pronouncement. 1:1-7 is the introduction, 1:8-15 preliminary remarks about his ardent desire to minister to those who were at Rome. In 1:16,17 Paul sets forth the theme of the letter and in 1:18-3:20 he argues for the rational of his thesis with a powerful case for the universal guilt of the human race.

Having done this Paul is now set to return to his thesis (1:16,17) with a view towards its development. Paul, perhaps felt the need to address the issue of man's absolute necessity of salvation, prior to presenting his cogent demonstration as to just how the gospel is the power of God.¹ The obvious question that needed to be settled is whether or not there is any hope of amelioration for the depressing portrait of human rebellion he had just finished etching. Is man hopelessly consigned to futility and frustration? Is there hope to be had anywhere?

While, those Christians at Rome are waiting for the development of Paul's gospel, we, the Christian of the 21st century follow the great Apostle's line of reasoning with equal anticipation; because not only is this one of the most important statements in the entire New Testament, but it has volumes to speak to

¹ Some scholars have suggested that the Epistle in general follows Paul's customary method of preaching the gospel during his missionary endeavors.

the contemporary Church as she seeks to respond to the fierce winds of modern confusion and present assaults on orthodoxy. The issue of justification, its nature and ramifications will, after all be an issue of paramount importance in all eras of the life of the Church in this world.

Analysis of Ro. 3:21-31:

3:21-26 *God's righteousness*: its source, separation, revelation, and attestation. (v.21) Its availability and instrumentality. (vv. 22-24) Its method and rational. (vv. 25,26)

God's Righteous:

The Church at Rome knew that up to this point Paul, in a preparatory manner, addressed only what they had been. He addressed what they were, that he might set the stage for a better understanding as to what they had become and how they should live in light of it.² It must have truly been a source of chagrin and even astonishment to the first century Jewish Christians at Rome as Paul pits the law of God against the radical evil existing at the core of individual human beings and decisively exposed the law's inadequacy to their bewildered eyes (3:20). Paul explains that the law's function was to give the knowledge of sin, but not to actually deal with it.

It was observed by Schlatter that Paul does not speak like a sociologist by describing the inevitable human associations that must follow his awful portrait of man in the grips of sin.³ Rather he directs our attention to what God has done about the situation. Paul's approach is always distinctively theological in its thrust. In a sense here he sums up the major points made in the first chapter. God's righteousness is revealed and attested by the Law and the Prophets. What is new here is that Paul characterizes it (God's righteousness) by its relationship to the Torah.⁴ The relationship is one of separation. It is not

² Schlatter, 91

³ *ibid.*, 91

⁴ "It is not primarily the law as something for humans to do, but the law as a system, as a stage in God's unfolding plan, that is in view here." Moo, 223

accomplished by the law but apart from it. Barth, put it well when he described the righteousness of God as, “wholly independent of every attempt, or imaginable attempt, that we could make to achieve liberty.”⁵

Now⁶ (in the gospel), apart from the Law and in opposition to the wrath of God, a righteousness from God is revealed. It wasn't that this righteousness hadn't existed previously. It had long been buried under the types and indistinct utterances of the Old dispensation.⁷ At the point where the Law proved to have reached its limit culminating in impotence, the gospel asserts itself as God's power (cf. 8:3).⁸ The terms used here are very rich with Old Testament freight. The phrase '*righteousness from God*' refers to God's eschatological action⁹ in justifying the sinner which was spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. The shadow which is cast here by the apostle extends beyond 1:16,17. Thus the concept of a revealed righteousness from God has dynamic overtones.¹⁰ “When the prophet spoke of the righteousness of God as being “revealed” he meant more than that it was to be disclosed to human apprehension. He means that it was to be revealed in action and operation; the righteousness of God was to be made manifest with saving effect (Ps. 98:1,2; Is. 46:13; 54:17; 56:1; 61:10,11; 62:1).”¹¹ It was vital for the sake of his case with the Jewish believers that he demonstrate that the gospel, as he was setting it forth, didn't call for a renunciation of the Torah; but, rather a proper understanding of it and its relationship to the gospel. Thus the apostle adds that the word was near them; its attestation came from their own patriarchs and prophets. Paul does this in

⁵ Barth, 93,94

⁶ Most commentators take this as having temporal implications. In favor of this view is the phrase, “to declare *at this time*, his righteousness,” in v. 26; as well as the overtones of this righteousness being *revealed* 1:17., Hodge, 88 Interestingly, and plausibly, I think, Murray here, in a foot note, argues against Sanday and Headlam, who see this as referring to periods, in favor of a difference in respect to manifestation. Murray, 109

⁷ Hodge, 88

⁸ 3:19, Paul asserts that the law functioned to leave men silenced and guilty under sin; but, was incapable of anything else other than serving as a minister of condemnation.

⁹ Moo, 219

¹⁰ “Of course this fulfillment, as Paul at once adds, is only for believers in Jesus Christ. The general revelation of Jesus Christ, and the eschatological event that has already taken place in Him, will take place only when He returns to judge.” Pannenberg, vol. 1, 210-11

¹¹ Murray, 29

two ways: (1) by direct assertion, here as in 1:2 and (2) by the formula “as it is written” followed by Old Testament quotations 1:17; 2:24; 3:4,10.

In vs. 21 we notice that this righteousness which is from God comes through the instrumentality of faith and that this faith has an object, namely Jesus Christ.¹² It is available to all who believe without reference to race or ethnicity. The Gentiles are on equal footing with the Jews with reference to this righteousness. Here faith is set forth as that which lifts one from a condition of guilt and condemnation into the realm of divine righteousness.¹³ But this faith, which alone can save, isn't a vague faith; it has its terminus in Jesus Christ. This faith is not to be understood as mere intellectual consent. Turretin argues persuasively that saving faith consists in three acts: knowledge, assent, and trust.¹⁴ Yet, true though this may be it; nevertheless, must be maintained in a way that can also be characterized as simple and child-like, as it is described by our Lord Himself. Whereas the prior dispensation was characterized by exclusivity this newly manifested gospel dispensation is characterized by a gracious offer made without distinction and available by faith alone. The dispensation of law was understood to be for one group through the keeping of a multitude of statutes and ordinances while under the gospel the offer is to a multitude of people through the single vehicle of faith alone.

vs. 23 contains a reintroduction of the idea previously asserted in 3:9 and implied in 3:19,20. What is certainly intended is that there are none righteous and without need of this redemption offered through the gospel. The original has here the aorist tense for sin, which could refer to the sin of all people in connection with Adam; however, Porter sees here a summarizing force, perhaps conceptualizing the total sin of the race in a single instance.¹⁵ All men are under wrath (1:18) and their reluctance to acknowledge it only exacerbates their predicament. There is; however, some uncertainty as what the exact meaning of

¹² “It is hardly necessary to show that Jesus Christ is the object and not the subject of the faith spoken of. It would be alien to the whole teaching of the apostle to suppose that what he has in mind is a faith that is patterned after the faith which Jesus himself exemplified, far less that we are justified by Jesus' own faith, that is to say, by the faith which he exercised.” *ibid.*, 111

¹³ Schlatter, 96

¹⁴ Turretin, vol. 2, 568

the last clause of the verse is. Murray suggests four options for understanding **...fall short of the glory of God**. (1) To fail to render to God the glory (2) to fail of receiving the glory (3) to come short of reflecting the glory (4) to fail of the consummated glory destined for the people of God. The first isn't persuasive because it is likely Paul would've added a word to clarify and the fourth seems to be more a consequence than the stating of the reason. Three seems to be more persuasive than option two and stands neatly in contrast to the effects of redemption. Murray has it as standing in opposition in the sense of on the one hand sin causes..., while on the other redemption has brought about.¹⁶ Moo notes that if taken in combination with Ro. 8, even Christians "fall short" until they are transformed at the last day by God.¹⁷ The stated extent of the available pardon in vs. 24 is commensurate with the extent of the exposure to the wrath as implied in vs. 23. All who are sensible of their status of condemnation will find justification available to them by means of faith in the decisive action of God. Paul, first of all emphasizes that the beneficiary of this justifying act of God contributes nothing but receives all.¹⁸ The significance of the justification can only be measured by contrasting it with the previous condition of being delivered over to the captivity of sin and its consequences, subject to death and held under the wrath of an omnipotent God, who hates sin. The reality of justification should not be regarded as merely the escape from the foregoing misery, because it cannot, in actuality be separated from its eschatological dimension. As Paul will later develop; **"...those He justified, He also glorified."** (8:30) Thus the grandeur and glory of this divine action is only fully measured by the distance between the creature damned and doomed and the creature redeemed and glorified in the very presence of God Himself. As was so aptly penned by R. Murray McChyne:

***When I stand before the throne, Dressed in beauty not my own;
When I see Thee as Thou art, Love Thee with unsinning heart
Then, Lord, shall I fully know-Not till then how much I owe.***

¹⁵ See footnote # 32 Moo, 226

¹⁶ Murray, 112

¹⁷ Moo, 227

¹⁸ Leenhardt, 100

The means by which this justification comes to sinful man is through the redemption that is in Christ. Leenhardt suggests that the introduction here of the twin ideas of liberation and redemption at once suggests to the believers in Rome the deliverance from Egypt and the emancipation of a slave by the payment to the liberating god.¹⁹ These concepts are endowed with a distinctly Christian understanding when redemption is presented as *in Christ*.²⁰ The connectedness of the notion of redemption with the coming out of the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage is inseparable in the biblical concept of redemption. Geerhardus Vos observed this, seeing in the exodus characteristics of soteric deliverance as truly typical as the divine power that wrought it, went on to note that, in the exodus redemption was portrayed as deliverance from an objective realm of evil. No people of God can spring into existence without being cut loose from a world opposed to God and themselves in their very origin.²¹ Redemption connotes deliverance from the bondage of sin and the penalty of the violated law of God. It is set forth here as the instrument by which justification is brought about.²² By faith instant entrance into the objective reality of the event of cavalry is supernaturally imputed to the believer. It thus, though a past act, becomes the basis of a present status change that carries with it eschatological implication. ***Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. Rom 8:23***

vs. 25 The death of Christ is not only a manifestation of the righteousness of God, but a physical manifestation and one to which appeal can be made.²³ God is expressly portrayed as the active agent. Paul would effectively eliminate any ideas of a bi-forcation of intention within the complex of the God-head.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 101

²⁰ Just as it is true of the entire revelation of the mystery that it has Christ for its content, so also the revelation of the righteousness of God, as the ground for acquittal in the divine judgment, takes place in Christ. Ridderbos, 166

²¹ Vos, 110

²² "...in the sense that the divine judgment on the sins of the world has, as it were, been drawn together in Christ's death, and in this way the *eschaton* has become present time. Ridderbos, 166

²³ Sanday and Headlam, 87

Redemption was not a case of Christ appeasing an angry Father who was disinclined towards mercy. Rather, **“...it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer...” Isa 53:10** and; as the Scripture elsewhere states quite clearly, **“this man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge...” Acts 2:23** The crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ was God’s public initiative as was asserted by Paul before Agrippa, **“it was not done in a corner.” Ac. 26:26**

Paul’s use of the term *hilasterion* has been the subject of much scholarly debate. It is a word rarely used in the New Testament. In fact besides this occurrence, which is Paul’s only usage, it appears elsewhere only in Hebrews 9:5. The mercy seat, as it is translated in the Lxx, is the place within the holy of holies where God manifested his glory to the nation of Israel. (Exo. 25:22) It was the lid or cover on the ark of the covenant. On the Day of Atonement the High Priest was to enter the most sacred compartment of the Temple complex, bearing incense, so that the cloud of smoke would cover the mercy seat, preventing him from being struck dead. (Lev. 16:13) He would then sprinkle seven times upon the mercy seat the blood of the substitutionary victim, thereby averting the wrath of God from the people, which was coming on account of their sins. Though some scholars have difficulty concluding that Paul here is comparing the Lord Jesus Christ with the furniture of the Tabernacle, it seems most likely to be his intent in this context. The emphasis is not on the actual person of Christ rather His appointed function or work in the economy of redemption. This figure should not be pressed to contain more meaning than the writer intended; but, rather should be understood to simply, but powerfully express the substitutionary character of Christ’ work. The context lends itself towards the notion of propitiation²⁴ and most modern English renderings have

²⁴ “If we reduce *hilasterion* here to some sub-personal ‘expiation’, as do some modern translations and commentators, then what has become of God’s wrath? Paul has undoubtedly put emphasis on it in the earlier stages on his massive argument. This understanding of the term leaves the wrath unaccounted for. Are we to understand that, though we are in some sense saved, God’s wrath is still in force? Or in the last resort God’s wrath can simply be ignored?” Morris, 169

gone in that direction.²⁵ However; the idea of expiation is in no way excluded.²⁶ Paul, here isn't speaking in general terms referring to the whole of the life and ministry of the Messiah, but is referring to a specific event; namely His death on the cross.²⁷ The nature of the justifying action of the divine being is revealed to men in the destruction and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁸ The reason of this activity was to answer the liability to the majesty and justice of God made probable by His seeming apathy towards transgressions in the past. The purpose of the death of Christ as set forth in holy Scripture has a very multifaceted relationship to the government of God.²⁹ But here it is stated that the end was with a view towards vindicating the ways of God before men. As was so well stated by Louis Berkhof, "God, in virtue of His divine righteousness and holiness, cannot simply overlook defiance to His infinite majesty, but must needs visit sin with punishment."³⁰ It thus stands to demonstrate that in God infinite mercy is not inconsistent with the strictest stroke of universal justice.

vs. 26. It is noted by Haldane here, that it isn't so much the question as to whether God was just, for God was always just in forgiving sins; but, that in Christ the ground of his just dealings was made manifest.³¹ Paul adds at the present time, thus preventing the sentimentalizing assumption that he means all sins anywhere at anytime. He is contrasting dispensations; i.e., the sins committed by the saints before the manifestation of the Messiah. Perhaps he is even contemplating the Patriarchs, Moses, and the Prophets.³² It is in this

²⁵ after an interesting and detailed discussion of this much debated topic Moo concluded that the NRSV and NIV renderings on "sacrifice of atonement" is "as good as we can do." Moo, 236 Hodge, in fact, argues strenuously that the rendering of "mercy seat" is probably predicated on a misunderstanding of the proper meaning of the Hebrew term by the Greek translators. Both the Greek and the Latin versions give it the sense of mercy seat which *trpk* never has. , Hodge, 92

²⁶ Expiation removes the offense, the guilt, and the consequences. In this sense Paul would call Christ's death an expiation. Pannenberg vol. 2, 411

²⁷ Nygren, 158

²⁸ While, "redemption contemplates our bondage...propitiation contemplates our liability to the wrath of God and is the provision of grace to release us from that bondage. Murray, 116

²⁹ "Only through Him is the righteousness of God clearly seen to be the unmistakable governance of men and the real power in history." Barth, 106

³⁰ Berkhof, 370

³¹ Haldane, 152

³² This is rendered the more probable by Paul's following with a discussion of the nature of justification as it relates to Abraham and King David.

manner that God presents Himself to the sinner as the infinitely just justifier of the guilty. The scope of His justice can be apprehended by a due contemplation of propitiation. Sin is shown to be infinitely evil in that it required the death of one who was infinite in holiness. It is seen to be an infinite insult to the majesty of God in that it required the sacrifice of one who was infinitely dear to the heart of God. Man's condition was infinite in its criminal guilt, for it required infinite innocence to lift his guilt. Those who are justified by God are none but those who have faith in Jesus Christ and none are justified without this faith.³³ Paul directly sets forth Christ as the locus of the redemptive activity of the divine being. The prominence of the designations for the Lord Jesus should not be overlooked, for there is a note of exclusivity contained in Paul's constant usage. The faith is stated as in *Christ*, the redemption came by *Christ Jesus*, the atonement³⁴ is accessed through faith in *His* blood, and finally those who are justified are done so through faith in *Jesus*. To seek this desperately needed exodus out from under the wrath of God anywhere else, is to simply seek in vain. Just as there is none exempt from the wrath; salvation is confined to those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. All who seek access to the mighty blessing of justification must seek it in the Lord Jesus through the portal of faith.

Conclusion:

This passage of scripture was central in the thinking of the reformers and remains undiminished in its importance to the Church of the present day. During the theologically turbulent times of the present era little can be taken as more important than a sober consideration of the message of justification by faith. Not only does the shadow of the modern equivalent to Torah hang low over the present secular mind; but, it darkens the door of the contemporary Church. The shadow of Torah is felt wherever human efforts of seeking justification is present. On a individual level much of the frantic spirituality that passes for personal

³³ Perhaps one espousing pluralist views would argue that the possibility is not expressly excluded; however, such a notion introduced here would do serious violence to Paul's intended overall argument here.

³⁴ NIV rendering

religion today stems from the nagging uncertainty that inevitably comes with the deep innate awareness of having run afoul of the law of God. Let us proclaim with Paul from the roof tops in our own generation, “**...no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.**” 3:20

As it was put by Toplady,

***Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands.
Could my zeal no respite know could my tears forever flow;
All for sin could not atone, Thou must save and Thou alone.***

It's only a realization of this great central truth charged with the power of the Holy Spirit that rightly charges individuals to give up their foolish reasoning and submit to the righteousness from above; which is their true hope, their only hope. “***But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.***” This, and this alone is the approved weaponry that has been and now is mighty through God to the casting down of the strongholds of Satan. All other ground is sinking sand and all other instruments mere carnal implements. May we tell it afresh with renewed confidence in its inherent power and may the glory of the Lord be revealed.