

Justification: God's Great Gift

Romans 3:19-26

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¹⁹Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom 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. ²⁶It 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.

December is here. It seems like it just left. Our stores are reminding us that we need to be thinking of gifts and more so than last year—they need the money. I remember 2 great gifts I received as a child that made Christmas special and fun. I remember getting a 10 speed "English racer" bike. It was fast and smooth and made me think I was really something special in the neighborhood. I also remember opening a football uniform when I was about 10. As I remembered that gift I thought it was the greatest gift ever and thought it was the uniform of Johnny Unitas, number 19, the greatest player ever. So—when I donned that uniform, I became him and was great in my own right. A few years ago we were looking through old pictures and I found a picture of that uniform and the number was actually 12 and it was not a Baltimore Colt uniform but just a generic outfit. My young mind had transformed that uniform into what I most wanted.

Gifts are fun, but this morning I want to speak about the greatest gift of all --the gift of justification is as good as it gets. I have studied justification a lot and realize there is a lot of debate concerning its meaning and importance, so this morning I will stay away from the controversies and preach my best understanding of this text and its relevance. I have been greatly influenced by 3 pastors in recent months on this topic. John Piper gave a lecture on justification and its importance a couple of years ago. Our own pastor preached on justification on Easter this year. I knew I liked Pastor Mark, but when he tackles justification on Easter—I think he justified himself. Finally, Tim Keller (a pastor in NYC) preached this spring on justification and my thoughts were greatly challenged on the beauty of the reality of justification. Those are my footnotes for this sermon and I borrow from them often. I have divided the sermon into 3 parts to help unpack this beautiful gift. First we will look at what

justification is not; then we will move to what justification is; and finally we will see how justification is possible.

I would like to ask one question as we begin this sermon. The question is "What right do you have to be a part of God's kingdom or to enter his heaven? That is a loaded question. Recently I spoke with Nate Irwin and he said he had asked several people that question recently and their answers were sobering. Several started to say they were doing better and living better and going to church and hanging with better people etc. Is that the right answer? Paul would say—NO WAY! The answer is summed up in the concept of justification.

I. What justification is not (Rom. 3:19-20)

The first three chapters of Romans are very sobering and eye opening. Paul argues in no uncertain terms that humans have a major problem. In 3:10 we read that there are "none righteous"; in verse 12 "all have turned aside"; verse 15 "their feet are swift to shed blood; vs.18 there is no fear of God in their eyes". You get the picture—

Verses 19 and 20 sum up the argument. Verse 19 tells us that "whatever the law says it speaks to those under the law." This refers to the Jews who were avid followers of the law. The Jews believed they were God's people by birth and the markers justifying them as God's people were deeds of the law such as circumcision, Sabbath keeping and dietary laws. It is interesting in the gospels to see Jesus go after their view of justification as he healed on the Sabbath and did not do the works they thought he should do. Paul continues by saying that "every mouth may be stopped and the whole world be held accountable to God." There is no one who can defend himself with his mouth or his deeds to show his right to stand before a holy God. All excuses of the mouth or self justification are silenced and all are accountable to the righteous God. Verse 20 amplifies that idea by asserting in no uncertain terms that by the works of the law (which is the best statement of what it means to look righteous), NO human being will be justified in his sight." The function of the law was to give the knowledge of sin. Sin is further defined in verse 23 as we hear again that all have sinned, but the added information is that sin is "falling short of the glory of God." We are totally unable to meet up to God's glory and in attempting to do it in our own works we fall infinitely short. No flesh is justified.

I want to spend a short time working on the definition of justify in this verse. Tim Keller gave a practical definition of it in his sermon that was very helpful to me. He called it "a validating performance record that opens doors". I will share a more Pauline definition in the next point, but I like the stimulation of this definition. We spend much of our life doing performances to validate ourselves and open doors. Keller uses the illustration of seeking a job. My son is looking for a job and he has composed a resume. It includes his validating performances at school, his present job, his hobbies etc. He hopes that an employer will look at his validating performances and accept him and consider his resume sufficient or a justification to hire him

and pay a lot of money. The Bible makes it clear that we cannot justify or validate ourselves. We will fall short every time. SELF RIGHTEOUSNESS (validation) FAILS EVERY TIME!!!!

That is good news even though it could sound bad. Many of us try to justify ourselves and fall short and try again and do that for our whole lives. It is good to know we cannot do it so we should stop trying. Here are some examples of self justifying that many have attempted. Some try to justify themselves by living moral. We adopt the Santa Clause method of justification. "You better not shout, you better not cry you better not pout, I'm telling you why--Santa Clause is coming to town." He will look for your validating record to determine whether to open the doors of the sleigh and dump the goods to you. Are you worthy? We act moral for Santa and grow up thinking that we must strive to be moral to validate God's grace. Do you know why we love scandals, like the story of Tiger Woods? We want to find people who are worse than us so that even though we know we are not perfect morally, someone is worse.

We also try to justify ourselves by our careers. We are justified by our jobs so we work too many hours and perhaps are a bit shady because our justification is our jobs. We will feel horrible if we lose our jobs if that is the validating performance that defines your existence. I read this article recently about Alex Rodriguez (A-Rod) who is one of the best baseball players ever. The article by Ken Rosenthal on 11-2-09 reads: For A-Rod to reach rock bottom, he had to torch his marriage, admit to using steroids and undergo major hip surgery. Any of those could leave a man broken, or close to it. But the combination of catastrophes helped Rodriguez finally grasp the essential truth of his existence. Baseball is what makes him special, nothing else. Now with one more victory (to win the World Series), A-Rod's remarkable journey to postseason salvation will be complete." What a hopeless salvation. One based on self work that will only satisfies for a short time and the question will be—when will you do it again.

Others justify themselves by good grades in school, good looks, technical aptitude, cooking, marriage, and many others. One of my favorite self justification techniques is children. We define ourselves by our kids and if that is not enough we define ourselves by our grandkids. That is self justification. We could be spiritual and justify ourselves by our preaching or our witnessing or whatever. In the end—no one will be able to justify themselves. We all fall short and WE KNOW IT!!!! One of the great hymns that pounds home this point is "Just as I am" The first verse says simply "just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me". The next clause is the invitation "and as thou bidst me, come to thee, O Lamb of God I come." I do not come in my own righteousness. It is time for us to put off self justification.

II. So - what is justification? (Romans 3:21-23)

This passage starts with 2 unbelievable and great words. The words are **BUT now**. Those words are words of great hope. It Paul ended his epistle in verse 21 we would be hopeless and left with only ourselves. That sounds like much of the world today. BUT now there is a new story. There is a righteousness that is not from ourselves. Some writers use the word "alien"

to describe this righteousness. It is from God, he is the source –it is his righteousness. The word “righteousness” comes from the same root as justify in the former verse. In Greek the words are the same, but one is a verb and the other a noun. We have no verb for righteous so we say justify. If we were to be literal we would say something like ‘righteousize’ for justify. The term is used in Jesus’ time for court room proceedings. I did some research for a definition of justify and found this from an early church father, Clement of Alexandria. His definition was similar to some more contemporary definitions. He said there are 2 aspects to justification. First, it is the “discharging of the debt of sin”. To be justified in a Biblical sense, one must have his sins removed. To be “righteousized”, sins must be removed. However, as Clement points out there is much more to it than merely forgiveness of sin (which is a lot). There is also the “crediting (imputation) of Christ’s righteousness. What a beautiful reality. We are not only cleansed of sin, but we are given a standing of being righteous not because of our own righteousness (which does not exist) but because of Christ’s righteousness that is credited to us through faith which is belief in Him. Hear these other 2 verses that warm the heart of every believer who has been justified. II Corinthians 5:21—“For our sake, he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that **in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” Also, Philippians 3:8-9—“For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, **BUT** that which comes through faith in Christ, the **righteousness from God** that depends on faith.”

Verse 22 tells us that there is a righteousness of God which comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Access to this declaration of righteousness that demonstrates the great exchange of our sins and credits us with his righteousness come to those who believe. It is by faith. It is not by works. You access this justification when you recognize your inability to justify yourself by yourself and cling in trust to God who justifies those who trust in HIM.

I think the hymn “The Solid Rock” sums it up well. The writer says “My hope is built on nothing less than **Jesus blood and righteousness**”. The last verse then answers the question at the start of the sermon—“when he shall come with trumpet sound, O, may I then in him be found. **Dressed in his righteousness alone**, faultless to stand before the throne. SOOOO—in whose righteousness do you stand?”

III. How is this possible—Romans 3:24-26

Verse 24 further explains how God can do such a thing as declare a sinner righteous. Is it “legal fiction”? Do we just pretend like nothing ever happened and just go back to playing with God as if sin were no big deal? Absolutely not!! Justification has a basis that is beautiful and God glorifying. He is “just in justifying” and Paul justifies God’s right to justify. We are told that justification is by grace (undeserved) and is a gift. This passage mentions 2 realities that give God the right to justify the ungodly.

First it is because of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The word redemption is a beautiful Biblical word. It comes from the market place. Like today, in ancient times there were market places where one would go to buy merchandise. Unlike today, there would be a place where you could buy slaves. The slaves would often be there naked and available for possible purchasers to observe the product and see if it would meet their desires. If so the buyer would procure the slave with a price. The slave would be redeemed and in a sense, be determined worthy to be taken. God sees us in all our reality and realizes there is nothing in us that could merit redemption and he buys us anyway. Jesus paid the price for our redemption and he has the right to declare us righteousness because he bought us with his blood. The price of justification was huge, but we paid none of it. He paid it all so he has the right to justify us.

The text goes on to say the Jesus is our propitiation. That is an unusual English word. The word has the idea of appeasing wrath. Propitiate is to do something to relieve the wrath of someone. The Greek word is used in the OT for the Hebrew idea we see as the Mercy Seat. That is the place where the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement to appease the wrath of God and in a sense to "justify" the people. Jesus becomes the one who takes God's wrath and is therefore able to justify us before a holy God. Some of you struggle with assurance of your salvation and justification. Some of us should struggle, because you show no fruit of faith. However for many of you, this reality of Jesus taking our sins and appeasing the wrath of God should cause you to see justification for what it is. Do you still fear the wrath of God? You need to live by faith. You need to recognize that Jesus took your place and took the wrath of the father and you do not need to experience his wrath. Should you live a moral life? You definitely should, but not to gain merit and appease God. You should do it based on your justification, not to obtain your justification.

The song that I love that amplifies this point is the one we sang this morning. Listen to these words again. "Before the Throne of God above, I have a strong and perfect plea. A great high Priest whose Name is Love who ever lives and pleads for me. My name is graven on his hands; my name is written on his heart. I know that while in Heaven He stands, no tongue can bid me thence depart." The final verse is wonderful—"Behold him there the risen Lamb, my perfect, spotless righteousness. The great unchangeable I AM, the king of glory and of grace. One in Himself I cannot die. My soul is purchased by His blood. My life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God."

Conclusion:

What can we take away from this passage? Let me suggest at least 4 "take aways"

1. Free justification is incredibly God glorifying and God honoring and promotes worship of him. (Rom. 11:36). When we think and live in light of the reality of justification we will only boast in HIM. He will be our crown and glory . Our lives will be a continual song of praise to Him. Glory to God in the Highest.

2. We need to preach the gospel to ourselves every day. Rom. 1:17 says the "just shall live by faith". We often take this to mean that we must trust in Jesus and he justifies us and we live our lives and then in heaven when the big question is asked we pull out our justification badge and flash it to God and he says we are allowed into his presence. While that may be true it is much more than that. The idea of the just shall live by faith is that we must live daily and hourly in light of the reality of justification. We should open the gift of salvation daily and live every day by faith. God has declared us righteous. We should view our relationships, jobs, friends, government, kids, parents, singleness, spouses, church etc in light of the reality that God has declared us righteousness. Do not start your days with the goal of self justification. That is idolatry. Start every day with the beauty of the just shall live today by faith.

3. Since we are justified and validated by God himself, we can take risks for the kingdom. What do you have to lose? Look at Rom. 8:33. There are many people in our church who live as if God has justified them and are willing to take great risks. Katie Williams is one we saw earlier this morning—going to Cambodia with the gospel. We have 2 mission interns who will be leaving us early in 2010 to go to Japan and Laos to share the gospel of free justification. Both of these families have merit in themselves. One was a doctor and one a teacher. They have wonderful spouses and one has 4 great kids. They both play golf well and are basically nice guys. BUT, our missionaries believe in free justification and believe that the message of justification by faith needs to go to people who are still trying to justify themselves. They represent other homegrown justified people like the Daratony's, Renney Nanney, O'Malley's, Pattens, and any others I may have overlooked. Justification makes all the difference in the world.

4. Finally, there is a call to sinners. The song writer says it this way—"Come ye sinners, poor and needed; lost and ruined by the fall. If you tarry until you're better-----YOU WILL NEVER COME AT ALL. You will never get better. If you are here this morning and have never put your faith in Jesus, I have great news. Jesus ready stands to save and justify you. He is full of grace and truth. Come to him. The answer to my opening question is clear. What right do you have to enter God's kingdom? The good news is that we have Christ's righteousness obtained by faith without works. Praise him!!!! The Just shall live by Faith.

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