

AN EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF ROMANS 3:21-26

Introduction

Today the gospel is under attack on many fronts, and traditional understandings of the work of Christ are being challenged frequently. Theological liberals continue to deny categorically that Christ appeased the wrath of God because they will not believe that God is a God of wrath. Other groups, wanting to create substantive unity among Roman Catholics, Protestants, and even Jews, are trying to show that the main point of Paul's theology is that religious sects should overcome the distinctive minutia that divides them and embrace the heart of Christ, which simply works to love everyone without distinction. Some who claim to be evangelicals, under the guise of eliminating "merit theology," speak of a gracious principle everywhere in Scripture, but actually end up undermining grace and articulating a salvation of works. These and many other errors spring from a failure to grasp the biblical distinction between the law and the gospel so clearly taught by Paul in Romans 3:21-26 and a host of other passages. The main point of Paul's argument is that Christ must meet the requirements of divine justice if God is to show grace to anyone. Paul teaches that the justice of God in upholding the demand of perfect conformity to His own holiness is the logical ground of the gracious saving activity of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Simply put, God's legal justice makes Christ's gracious death necessary.

Exegetical Commentary on Romans 3:21-26

The Manifestation of God's Righteousness in Relation to the Law (3:21-22a)

There is discontinuity between the law and God’s righteousness (3:22a). Romans 3:21 begins with the words, “but now,” which signify a major shift in Paul’s argument. The majority of commentators argue that the words point to a temporal transition rather than a logical one. Because Romans 1:1-3:20 is foundational to the main thrust of the remainder of the book, it could be argued that Paul’s meaning is logical, since Romans 3:21 clearly marks a point of logical contrast to the material that precedes it. We are not regarded righteous in God’s sight through works of obedience, but through faith in Christ. That is the logical transition being made. However, it seems that Paul’s main point is temporal, contrasting the former epoch in salvation history to the present one. Romans 1:1-3:20 shows how both those with the law and those without the law failed to measure up to God’s righteous requirements, but now, in the present time (Rom 3:26), the righteousness of God has been put on display. In Galatians 4:4, Paul says that “when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son.” This does not mean that in the former times men were justified by works or by some manner other than Christ, and that only now people are justified by faith in Christ as though there is some radical difference in the way of salvation for men in different periods of time. Paul is not making any such distinction. Rather, he is only saying that now the righteousness of God is manifested both apart from the law covenant and in harmony with the law covenant. Paul often uses the words “but now” to designate this redemptive historical shift (Rom 6:22; 7:6; 1 Cor 15:20; Eph 2:13; Col 1:22);¹ so, it is not surprising that he does the same here.

Further evidence that Paul is referring to the change from the period of the Old Testament to the period of the New Testament is his use and meaning of the word “law” in the phrase “law and Prophets.” Though the Jewish covenant may not exhaust what Paul means by “law” in Romans 3:21, that does seem to be the main idea. In the second chapter of Romans, Paul

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Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 221.

argues that everyone is without excuse because even the Gentiles, who do not possess the written document of the old covenant Scriptures, are under the “law” because it is written on their hearts, and that everyone is condemned who tries to keep the law covenant in order to earn justification. However, the righteousness of God is manifested totally apart from the law covenant. Two things follow from this. First, the righteousness of God is not based on the law covenant. Actually, it is not based on “covenant” at all. As will be pointed out later in a discussion on what it means to fall short of the glory of God, the righteousness of God is grounded in something far greater than the covenant, and in fact, though it is outside the scope of the present study, it would be more correct to say that the law covenant with the Hebrew nation is based on the righteousness of God, which is His holy character. Second, the righteousness of God is made known or “manifested” apart from the law covenant. God’s righteousness is most clearly manifested by something other than the types, figures, and shadows of the Old Testament. This apparently is what Paul means by “apart from the law.”

John Murray argues differently, however, and says that the phrase “apart from the law” should be read as “apart from the works of the law,” which appears in verses twenty and twenty-eight. James Dunn agrees with Murray and reasons to the conclusion that Paul is mainly countering the idea that righteousness comes through conformity to Jewish boundary markers, such as Sabbath, food laws, and circumcision.² However, Tom Schreiner refutes Dunn’s thesis and successfully proves that the “works” of the law are simply acts of obedience to the requirements of the Old Testament and are not limited to Jewish boundary markers.³ Schreiner says that Dunn’s understanding is too simplistic and does not account for all the data of Scripture. Unlike Dunn, Murray’s purpose is not to reduce “works of the law” to a set of Jewish boundary markers. He

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James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38A, (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 165.

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Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 41-72.

interprets Paul to mean that obedience to the law plays no part in obtaining the justifying righteousness of God.⁴ Murray's theology at this point is totally correct, but to make "justification apart from works" Paul's primary meaning in the argument at this stage seems to miss what Paul is trying to say, namely, that the righteousness of God stands in a relationship of discontinuity and continuity to the Old Testament law. In order to adopt Murray's position, the interpreter must not only insert the word "works" into Paul's language, but he has to understand the word "law" in a manner that limits its meaning to "obedience for righteousness" while refusing to see any reference to the Jewish law covenant. Apparently Paul often uses the word to mean both when he employs it.⁵

Murray could certainly be correct, and the meaning for which he argues would be consistent with Paul's line of argumentation; however, to interpret "law" exclusively in terms of "works" is probably an underinterpretation. Clearly, Paul teaches that God's righteousness is manifest apart from human obedience to the law, but it is also manifest apart from the law covenant of the Old Testament, which seems to be his meaning here. This interpretation fits with the temporal interpretation of "but now" at the beginning of the verse. It also fits well with the remainder of the passage in which Paul shows how God's righteousness benefits all humanity without distinction, not just those who are under the Jewish covenant. So, Paul's intention is to communicate the theological truth that apart from the law covenant, God's righteousness is manifested.

There is continuity between the law and God's righteousness (3:21b-22a). In order

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John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 109 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

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Paul does not always use the word *no/moj* in the same way throughout his letter; therefore, it is difficult to arrive at a high degree of certainty here. However, Paul has been dealing with the fact that the Jews have broken the law covenant and that the Gentiles, who were never in possession of the revelation of the law covenant, have also violated the principles of that covenant. Up to this point in Paul's discussion, *no/moj* most often seems to refer both to "working for righteousness" and to the Jewish "law covenant" (examine 2:12-15, 17, 18, 20, 23, 25-27; 3:19, 20).

to avoid misunderstanding, Paul is careful to point out that the old covenant stands in a relationship of continuity with the righteousness of God, even though the righteousness of God is apart from the law covenant. Paul does not want anyone to think that God's promises have failed or that the covenant made with the Jews was useless or lacking in abiding authority. In Romans 3:2, Paul refers to the Old Testament Scriptures as the very "oracles of God." Later in the epistle he writes, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). Like the phrase, "apart from the law," Paul's statement, "the law and the Prophets" is subordinate to the "righteousness of God," and explains the relationship between the law and the righteousness of God. The "law and Prophets" refers to the whole Old Testament (Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23). The Old Testament itself anticipates a future manifestation of the righteousness of God (Isa 11:5; 42:6; 46:13; 51:5, 6, 8; 61:3), and points out that the saving intention of God would not finally be achieved by the administration of the old covenant, but that it looks forward to its own fulfillment (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-27; Deut 28-30).⁶ Hence, the new manifestation of the righteousness of God and the fact that it comes "apart from the law" does not imply that God changed His original design, but shows that its appearance in the person of Jesus Christ is the intentional progression of God's original saving design. The fact that Paul wishes to show the continuity of the righteousness of God with the Old Testament validates its significance and shows his submission in the highest degree to its authority. Evidently Paul did not believe that countless redactors shaped the text of the Old Testament to fit their own political, social, and cultural agendas. Clearly, he saw the Old Testament as the Scriptures of Truth, and regarded it the very Word of God, which must be taken seriously and handled with diligent care. The plain implication of his mentioning the continuity of the new

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Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 180.

epoch with the old is that any gospel not under-girded by the witness and authority of the Old Testament is no gospel at all.

There is considerable disagreement regarding the meaning and nature of the phrase “righteousness of God,” which is both “apart from” and “witnessed” by the Old Testament Scriptures.⁷ God’s righteousness is the theme of Romans 3:21-26 and is represented as the ground and reason for His sending Christ to justify sinners; therefore, it is crucial for the interpreter correctly to understand the author’s meaning. The “righteousness of God” or “his righteousness” occurs four times (21, 22, 25, 26), and the “dikaiosunē” word group as a whole occurs six times in this very short section of text. The frequency of occurrence shows the high degree of significance the meaning of these words carries for the author in the present context. Evidently, Paul meant two different things by the “righteousness of God” in this passage. In the first section (21, 22), he apparently refers to the status of righteousness, which God confers upon human beings who have faith in Jesus Christ. In the last section (25, 26), Paul seems to intend the attribute of divine justice. While it may be possible to assign the same meaning to the phrase throughout the pericope, which is almost always preferable to attaching two different meanings to the same phrase in the same paragraph, to try to maintain a single meaning for the “righteousness of God” in this text would strain both the logic and the meaning of the surrounding context in Romans 3:21-26. Some disagree, arguing that the “righteousness of God” refers to the covenant faithfulness of God and should be understood as His saving righteousness; however, that interpretation does not satisfy the construction in verses twenty-five through twenty-six and will be refuted in the discussion of those verses. Another possibility would be to see the “righteousness of God” in verses twenty-one and two as referring to the justice of God. While that

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See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1986), 209-210. Stott outlines the three prevalent interpretations of the “righteousness of God.”

rendering fits well at with the end of the passage, it seems forced and unnatural at the beginning. The attribute of divine justice alone does not procure salvation “through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.” Therefore, it must have a meaning different than that of “divine justice.”

It seems best to understand “the righteousness of God” (21, 22) as a gift from God that renders people “not guilty” before the bar of God’s judgment.⁸ It is a status conferred upon all who put their faith in Jesus Christ. This comports with its meaning in Romans 1:17 where righteousness in terms of legal status is clearly intended. The phrase “dikaiosunē theou” should be interpreted as “the righteousness which is *from* God,” with “theou” understood as a genitive of source. There are a number of reasons for interpreting this phrase as a forensic verdict and declaration of “righteous status.”

One important argument in favor of the doctrine of “gift-righteousness” is the way $\theta\delta\chi$ (translated by words with the Greek root dik in the LXX) is used in the Old Testament. Most Protestant scholars generally agree that $\theta\delta\chi$ has a forensic sense, but not all understand that it “can also be considered from the standpoint of the human being who receives ‘God’s righteousness.’”⁹ Moo correctly shows that in every context in which God’s forensic, saving, and relational righteousness is intended, there is also “an aspect of gift or status enjoyed by the recipient.”¹⁰ For example, Psalm 51:14 says, “...O God the God of my salvation; my tongue will rejoice in your righteousness,” and in Isaiah 46:13, “I bring near my righteousness and my salvation will not delay.”¹¹ But the gift character of saving righteousness is especially clear in

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Several commentators agree with this interpretation. See, e.g. Cranfield, *Romans*, 95-99; Moo, *Romans*, 65-70; Murray, *Romans*, 110-111. Often the contemporary scholars who disagree with this rendering advance some version of the “New Perspective,” and argue Romans 3:21 means that the saving righteousness of God in terms of His “covenant faithfulness” has appeared. They insist that the “righteousness of God” is the saving activity of God on behalf of His people in history in the sense of His fulfillment of His obligations to the covenant.

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Moo, *Romans*, 81-82.

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Ibid., 82.

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See also Psa 22:31; 35:28; 40:10; 69:27; 71:15, 16, 19, 24; 88:12; 98:2; 119:123; Mic 6:5; 7:9; Isa 51:5,

Psalm 35:27-28, “Let those who *desire my righteousness* shout and be glad . . . and my tongue will declare your righteousness.”¹² These texts serve as the Old Testament background to Paul’s comprehension of the “righteousness of God;” therefore, the meaning of divine righteousness in Romans 3:21-26 is significantly impacted by them. “Righteousness” has various other nuances of meaning in the Old Testament as well, but they are outside the scope of the present study. The most important thing to realize is that the “gift character” of divine righteousness is not foreign to the Old Testament and that Paul’s meaning here is consistent with it.

Another important consideration in interpreting the meaning of divine “righteousness” in Paul is that it often occurs in a near proximity to “faith” or “belief,”¹³ as it does in the present text. It makes no sense to say that God is righteous or “just” by, because, or through the faith of human beings. It must therefore refer to a righteousness that is given from God and received by faith in Jesus Christ.

Finally, and most importantly, “righteousness” is something that is given to human beings by God. That is, it becomes their possession and benefits them unto salvation. It is explicitly said to be a “gift” in Romans 5:17, “...much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the *free gift of righteousness* reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.” The gift of righteousness is “through Jesus Christ” (5:17); therefore, it is reasonable to conclude this is the same righteousness Paul is thinking of in Romans 3:21 when he speaks of the “righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.” Romans 4:11 says, “righteousness would be counted to them” who believe. Imputation is involved in Paul’s representation of the righteousness of God. Martin Luther called it an “alien righteousness” because it is a righteousness that comes to the believing sinner from without and does not originate with the individual who is declared righteous.

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¹² See also Psa 4:1; 37:6; 51:14; Isa 46:13; 50:5-8.

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See Rom 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 22, 9:30-31.

Philippians 3:9 confirms that Paul thinks of righteousness as a gift that comes from God, "...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."

The heart of the gospel is justification by faith alone through the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. Verse twenty-two only mentions faith as the means of receiving God's gracious gift of righteousness. Nothing is said of works, and nothing is said of the works of faith; but rather, faith, simply and truly is the appropriating organ of divine righteousness. However, some object that because "faith in Jesus Christ" is a genitive construction, "πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ" that it should read as a subjective genitive, "faithfulness of Jesus Christ." The argument is that if the verse is not translated in this way, then Paul's argument is a tautology, "righteousness is through *faith in Jesus Christ* for all *those who believe*." Those who insist on a subjective translation of the genitive say that this makes Paul needlessly repetitious. Either the subjective or objective genitive translation is possible in the Greek, but the question cannot be answered on the basis of grammatical considerations alone.¹⁴ Those who advocate the objective genitive must explain why Paul seems to repeat himself. The matter is easily resolved by noting that Paul adds more information in his second mention of believing in Christ. The first time he merely states that righteousness comes to those who put their faith in Him. But the second time, Paul says that this righteousness comes to *all* who believe, emphasizing the fact that there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks, but that everyone who exercises saving belief in Jesus Christ will receive His righteousness.¹⁵ Convincing arguments in favor of the objective genitive can be found in many

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Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 116.

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Murray, *Romans*, 111.

scholarly discussions of the issue.¹⁶ Tom Schreiner is especially helpful here.¹⁷ He concludes that “Paul often refers to the faith of believers”¹⁸ and that “he never refers to the faith of Christ.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Paul is explicit when he “writes specifically of Christ as being the object of believers’ faith,”²⁰ and according to Schreiner, “the flow of thought in Romans 3-4 and Galatians 2-3 supports the idea of faith in Christ.” Due to all of these considerations, “(I)hsou= Xristou=” should be read as an objective genitive, rendering the phrase “(pi/stewj I)hsou= Xristou=,” “faith in Jesus Christ.”

The Universal Manifestation of God’s Righteousness (3:22b-25a)

There is a universal need of justification (3:22b-23). Verse twenty-two ends with “for there is no distinction,” showing that the way of salvation is the same for both Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles have no excuse for their neglect of salvation on the ground that they are not Jewish, and Jews cannot rely upon their ethnicity for right standing before God. All certainly have sinned, but also, both Jews and Gentiles without distinction may be declared righteous by exercising faith in Jesus Christ. The next section describes the universal need and the universal means of justification in which God’s righteousness is manifest. First, the text says, “all have sinned,” but then progresses to explain that the significance of human kind’s universal sinfulness lies in the fact that all “fall short of the glory of God.” Some have suggested that because “have

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See Dunn, *Romans*, 166-167; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 344-345; Moo, *Romans*, 224-226; Murray, *Romans*, 111-112; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: An Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 209-216; James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 186-188.

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The following summary statements and quotations regarding the objective genitive are taken from Schreiner, *Paul*, 216.

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Rom 1:5, 8, 12; 3:27-28, 30-31; 4:5, 9, 11-14, 16, 19-20; 5:1-2; 9:30, 32; 10:6, 8, 17; 11:20; 14:23; 16:26; Gal 2:20; 3:2, 5, 7-9, 11-12, 14, 26; 5:5-6.

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While Paul certainly refers to the “obedience” of Christ (Rom 5:18-19; Phil 2:6-11), he never explicitly refers to the faithfulness of Christ.

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See Rom 10:9-14; Gal 2:16; Eph 1:15; Phil 1:29; Col 1:4; 2:5; Phlm 5.

sinned” is in the aorist tense, it references Adam’s first sin in a way similar to Romans 5:12-21.²¹ However, Adam is not mentioned in these verses, and to inject him here on the basis of a verb tense is to speculate beyond what Paul actually says. Paul’s point is that both Jews and Greeks have sinned. The aorist tense simply communicates that sin is a past act, without any further nuance of definition. A sin is a transgression of the law of God (1 Jn 3:4), but what does it mean to “have fallen short of the glory of God?”

Many commentators think that the “glory of God” is a reference to the future glorification of believers, rather than to the glory of God Himself.²² In this view, the “glory of God” is something to which human beings must conform on the last day. Dunn summarizes his version of this view, “So Paul probably refers here both to the glory lost in man’s fall and to the glory that fallen man is failing to reach in consequence.”²³ This understanding is not so objectionable as long as it is stressed that the glory man has lost and failed to reach is God’s standard of perfect righteousness. Unfortunately that particular fact is often overlooked and minimized by those who advance the eschatological view.

However, such an eschatological reading is unnecessary, and in the final analysis, it is likely incorrect as well.²⁴ “The glory of God” is about God’s glory (possessive genitive), not so much about man’s glorification and need of moral transformation. John Murray says that this verse means, “We are destitute of that perfection which is the reflection of divine perfection and therefore of the glory of God.”²⁵ It is about humanity’s need of reconciliation to God because all

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See e.g. Dunn, *Romans*, 168.

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See Cranfield, *Romans*, 204; Dunn, *Romans*, 168.

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Dunn, *Romans*, 168.

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The verb, u(sterou=ntai, “have fallen short,” is in the present tense, indicating that Paul wants to draw attention to the fact that sinners presently fall short of (or lack) God’s glory. This consideration makes the eschatological view less tenable.

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Murray, *Romans*, 113.

have failed to measure up to His perfect standard, which is His own glorious character. Human beings once possessed original righteousness at creation, but since the fall, all have come short of the righteous requirement of God. Paul's point is that all have sinned. All have broken the law; all have failed to glorify God, and all have failed to measure up perfectly to God's glory.

Therefore, something must be done if human beings are to be declared "not guilty." This is precisely why the gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ is so necessary and why God had to send Christ if sinners are to be saved and if His own justice is to be preserved.

There is a universal means of justification (3:24-25a). Not only do both Jews and Greeks need justification since both groups have sinned and fallen short of God's perfect standard, but the means of justification is the same, regardless of ethnicity. Hence, the participle, *dikaiou/menoi*, relates all the way back to the phrase, "for there is no distinction" (22b).²⁶ Moo says that being justified "indicates not universality (everybody), but lack of particularity (anybody)."²⁷ This section of Paul's argument (24-25a) forms a unit, which succinctly reveals the manner of justification by Jesus Christ. The main point of this passage is simple and is set forth with striking lucidity. There is no clearer and more thorough statement of the accomplishment of Christ in terms of justification in the entire Bible. First, the section explains what Christ accomplishes (24), and second, it shows how He accomplished it (25a).

First, the passage describes what Jesus did to accomplish justification. It begins with the statement that justification is given freely by His grace. At first brush these words appear almost redundant. But, Paul is emphasizing both the human side and the divine side of the gift. Justification is not earned by human merit, nor can human beings do anything whatsoever to obligate God to reward them, but it is given freely on the basis of the historical work of Christ

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See "Tracing the Argument in Romans 3:21-26" on page 29. It shows that there is a logical connection between "being justified" and "for there is no distinction." For a explanation of this method of analysis, see, Thomas R Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 97-126.

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Moo, *Romans*, 227.

alone. This is what Paul means when he says that justification is δωρεάν, which means, “freely” or “given.” The fact that justification is “given freely” proves that it has no ground on the human side, and the fact that it is “by his grace” emphasizes that the origin of the free gift is the gracious character of God. Thus, Paul stresses that God gives the gift from a motive of unmerited sovereign grace and human beings receive the gift at no cost to themselves. Murray rightly comments, “No element in Paul’s doctrine of justification is more central than this – God’s justifying act is not constrained to any extent or degree by anything that we are or do which could be esteemed as predisposing God to this act.”²⁸ Because Paul considers the nature of God’s gift from every possible perspective, there is no doubt about the gracious nature of the gift. Human beings can do nothing to secure it for themselves because it is given entirely free of charge to those whom God graces with salvation. To bring any degree of human merit to the doctrine of justification is to subvert the very heart of the gospel and to subtract from the glory of God in salvation.

The preceding shows that the first part of “what” Christ did was to secure the justification of human beings apart from any cost to them. There is no payment or purchase of justification on the human side; however, the next clause of the verse shows by contrast that justification is not free to God because it exacts a definite price from Him. Justification is accomplished “through redemption in Jesus Christ.” The redemption Paul speaks of here is something that occurs in Christ, not in individuals. “In Jesus Christ” is not a reference to union with Him, but to the historical accomplishment of redemption in the person and work of Jesus. White says, “Redemption is located in Jesus Christ,”²⁹ and Murray adds, “The redemption is not simply that which we have in Christ (Eph 1:7), but it is the redemption of which Christ is the

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Murray, *Romans*, 115.

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White, *The God who Justifies*, 193.

embodiment.”³⁰

The meaning of the word “a)polu/trwsij,” “redemption,” is hotly debated.³¹ In spite of the fact that much scholarly ink has been spilled to prove that a)polu/trwsij simply means “liberation,”³² Leon Morris and others have argued persuasively that it communicates far more than that. It is best to understand the term to mean, “purchase of deliverance” or “ransom.” According to Schreiner, “Secular Greek literature leaves no doubt that a price was involved for redemption.”³³ The word refers to a transaction, a payment rendered in order to buy freedom from the condemnation that results from having an unrighteous status before God. Fitzmyer summarizes, “Succinctly put, it denotes that Christ Jesus by his death on the cross has emancipated or ransomed humanity from its bondage to sin.”³⁴ The question then must be asked, “To whom was the ransom price paid?” Contrary to popular medieval theology, God did not pay a ransom to Satan; rather, verse twenty-five indicates that the price was paid to God.

The fact that liberation from the curse of God occurs by the payment of a price by God does not detract from the gracious character of the gift. Some might argue that a salvation based on such strict justice is not gracious, but on the contrary, the justice of the cross is the only way salvation can be free and gracious for sinful human beings. In fact, in the cross, the justice of God and the grace of God come together in a single act.

After explaining what Jesus did to secure a right standing before God for sinners, Paul moves on to explain how Jesus went about doing this and how men can become beneficiaries of

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Murray, *Romans*, 116.

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See “An Analysis of a)polu/trwsij in Romans 3:24” on page 22.

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See Dunn, *Romans*, 169. Dunn argues that redemption is a process that occurs for those who are being saved, and that this process is consummated on judgment day. But Dunn could not be more incorrect since redemption is not a process; rather, redemption is “in Jesus Christ,” and is something that Jesus accomplished at the cross in history, though it is applied in time.

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Schreiner, *Romans*, 189.

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Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 348.

what Jesus did (25a).³⁵ The main verb of this proposition is *proe/qeto*,³⁶ “put forward.” It is possible for the word to mean “purpose,” “plan,” or “design,” but “put forward,” or “set forth publicly” is a more appropriate translation for the present context since the righteousness of God is being “manifested” and since Christ was to be a “demonstration” of God’s justice as a sacrifice of propitiation.³⁷ There are good arguments in favor of the translation “purpose,”³⁸ and there is no strong objection to rendering the term in this manner; though, all things considered, it is an unlikely translation.

God “put forward” Christ as a “propitiation.” The meaning of the Greek word *i(lasth/rion*” is fiercely contested.³⁹ Some argue, following C.H. Dodd, that it cannot mean “propitiation” because in the Old Testament LXX it conveys the idea of a “means of expiation.” Others show that “propitiation” and “expiation” cannot be separated, but that the Greek word intends both. Christ sends away the sins of those who trust Him by means of satisfying the wrath of God. The main objection to the translation “propitiation” is an ideological aversion to the notion that God is a God of wrath; however, the chapters preceding Romans 3:21-26, reveal God to be a deity who will not let the guilty go unpunished, and who responds in righteous anger toward human rebellion. Romans 1:18 says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” This wrath is no mere “mechanism” of the universe, but is the personal anger of God, directed against all ungodliness. The New Testament teaches nothing new about the character of

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See “Tracing the Argument in Romans 3:21-26” on page 29.

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This is a middle form of the verb *proti/qhmi*.

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There is also the issue of the double accusative after the verb that makes “set forth” more likely. Both *o(/n* and *i(lasth/rion* are accusatives of *proe/qeto*.

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Cranfield, *Romans*, 208-209. Other historical commentators also favor the translation “purpose,” such as Origen.

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See “An Analysis of *i(lasth/rion* in Romans 3:21-26” on page 25.

God in this regard because He was angry over sin in the Old Testament as well (Nah 1:1-6). The Old and New Testaments even record certain surprising “outbursts” of anger (Lev 10:1-3; 1 Chr 13:5-14; Acts 5:1-11), which are not uncontrolled, but serve the purpose of impressing upon His people the fact of His holiness and the need to approach Him in righteousness according to His own requirement. Two important caveats need to be mentioned in any discussion on the wrath of God. The first is that God’s wrath is unlike the wrath of human beings. James says, “the wrath of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (Jas 1:20). Human anger is often capricious and ungodly, tending to spin out of control. God’s wrath is full of purpose and determined by His own will. The second caveat is that God’s wrath is not like the wrath of pagan deities who were created by men in the image of men. Bad weather and harsh circumstances do result from sin and do serve to exact certain penalties and to discipline the children of God, but they are not divine “temper tantrums” that can be quelled by a sacrifice of appeasement. Christ appeases God to turn away His permanent and decided anger toward sin and to restore a relationship of fellowship between Him and those who trust His Son. This “turning away of wrath” is the meaning of *ilasth/rion*. Hendriksen accurately translates *ilasth/rion*, “wrath-removing sacrifice.”⁴⁰

On the subject of the relationship between redemption and propitiation, Murray says, “Redemption contemplates our bondage and is the provision of grace to release us from that bondage. Propitiation contemplates our liability to the wrath of God and is the provision of grace whereby we may be freed from that wrath.”⁴¹ There is nothing illogical or inappropriate in the fact that both the subject and the object of propitiation is God Himself. God the Son satisfies the wrath of the whole Godhead. This does not imply disagreement among the persons of the Trinity because the Son willingly gave up His life and because the goal of propitiation is the glory of the

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William Hendriksen, *Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1980), 132.

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Murray, *Romans*, 116.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Propitiation” is modified by the two prepositional phrases “through faith in His blood.” The question is whether both phrases modify “propitiation” or whether “in His blood” modifies “through faith.”⁴² According to Leon Morris, blood, *ai(/mati)*, “signifies essentially the death. . . . [or] life given up in death.”⁴³ So, it seems best to link “in His blood” with “propitiation” rather than with “through faith” because the manner by which the satisfaction of God’s wrath was accomplished is by the death of Jesus. Additionally, there is no biblical precedent for making the “blood” or “death” of Christ the immediate object of faith. It could be argued that the reason Paul uses “blood” instead of “death” is because he wants to emphasize the sacrificial character of Christ’s death. The Bible says, “without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22).

Faith is the manner by which the gift of a righteous status procured by the sacrificial death of Christ is appropriated. “Faith” or “belief” is mentioned four times in this passage and is an important sub theme of Paul’s argument because it is the instrument of application, and it is the single disposition of the mind appropriate to receiving the free gift purchased by Christ because saving faith looks away from “self” and rests wholly in Jesus Christ.

The Purpose of the Manifestation of God’s Righteousness (3:25b-26c)

God’s righteousness is established in former times (3:25b-25c). This final major section reveals the logical ground of all the above saving activity of God. It begins with “i(na,” “in order that.” The purpose of God’s sending Christ was to demonstrate and secure His justice in passing over former and present sins. Christ was sent to vindicate the righteousness of God so that God would be known as both the “just” and “justifier” of any sinner who has faith in Jesus.

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See “A Syntactical Analysis of Romans 3:21-26” on page 28.

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Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 126.

First, God demonstrates that He is righteousness even though He passes over former sins. Here the definition of “His righteousness” is different from the definition of the “righteousness of God” at the beginning of the passage. In the present context of verse twenty-five, “righteousness” does not refer to the gift of a “status,” but to God’s own attribute of justice. Scholars disagree about this. The prevailing alternate view is that “His righteousness” means God’s “saving righteousness” in terms of the covenant faithfulness of God to all the promises He made throughout redemptive history.⁴⁴ Those who believe the text intends “saving righteousness” must insist that the translation “because of the passing over . . . of sins previously committed” is incorrect, and they argue that a better translation is “through the forgiveness of sins previously committed,” because the usual rendering does not make sense on their view.⁴⁵ It does not make sense to say that God demonstrated His covenant faithfulness “because” He forgave sins, but it does make sense to say that He demonstrated His faithfulness “through” the “forgiveness of sins.” So, the question is whether the text says “because” or “through,” and whether “forgiveness” is the reason for this “demonstration” or the means of “demonstration.” Though the instrumental meaning, “through,” of *dia/* plus the accusative is possible, it is very rare, and therefore, unlikely.⁴⁶ The normal translation of *dia/* plus the accusative is causal, “because.” The fact that God previously passed over sins does not create a need for Him to demonstrate His “saving righteousness,” but it does create a need for Him to show that He is just. The demonstration of divine justice fits squarely with the former section that teaches Christ died to appease the wrath of God. Clearly justice is in view. Piper says, “. . .the concept of God’s righteousness as his absolute faithfulness always to act for his name’s sake and for the preservation and display of his glory

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Dunn, *Romans*, 173.

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Moo, *Romans*, 238-239.

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Moo, *Romans*, 239; Schreiner, *Romans*, 197.

provides the key which unlocks the most natural and coherent interpretation of this text.”⁴⁷ Piper correctly connects the attribute of God’s justice to its ground in God’s glory and in no way changes the essential meaning of the traditional view. Instead, he only enhances it, contra Schreiner, who disagrees with Piper.⁴⁸

Those who believe that God’s righteousness is His covenant faithfulness usually insist that *pa/resin*,⁴⁹ “passing over,” should be read as a synonym with *a)/fesij*, “forgiven,” which accords better with their belief that God’s righteousness and saving activity are identical.⁵⁰ However, translating the word in its normal sense, “passing over,” comports with the *a)noxh/*, “forbearance” or “restraint,” of God. If God merely “passed over” sins, leaving them unpunished, it is clear why He would want to show His righteousness since justice and “passing over” guilt generally do not go hand in hand. However, even if *pa/resin* is best translated “forgiveness,” it does not militate against the traditional understanding of God’s righteousness since there would still have to be an explanation of how a just God could “forgive” sin. What the text intends to communicate is that God restrained himself by withholding judgment from sinners who deserved it in redemptive history. This “passing over” occurred before the time of the coming of Christ, and the mention of sins “previously committed” provides a contrastive exegetical link with the “but now” of verse twenty-one, lending additional support to the redemptive historical rendering of “apart from the law.” He passed over the sins of those during the time of the law covenant; therefore, His justice is called into question. But God has a sufficient and justifiable reason for passing over the sins of former times. Cranfield writes, “God has in fact been able to hold His hand and pass over sins,

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John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 150.

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Schreiner, *Romans*, 198.

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This is a *hapax legomena*.

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Dunn, *Romans*, 173.

without compromising His goodness and mercy because His intention has all along been to deal with them once and for all, decisively and finally through the cross.”⁵¹ God’s demonstration of righteousness does not mean that He was somehow obligated to vindicate Himself before His creatures, but only that He wanted to put His glory on display, showing the whole world that He is a just God and that His righteousness is not impugned. Also, in this demonstration is the preservation of His justice, as the cross is not merely a picture of divine justice, but the very outworking of it.

God’s righteousness is established in the present time (3:26). Verse twenty-six communicates the second thought in a series of two, which continues Paul’s explanation of how God can both forgive sins and remain just. First, he shows that God passed over sins of former times and remains righteous; now he proceeds to show that God continues to pass over the sins of those who believe and remains the just and justifier.

Paul repeats himself by relating that the purpose of God’s action in sending Christ to redeem His people by means of propitiation in blood was to demonstrate the righteousness of God in the present time as well. Tidball points out that the cross “functions retrospectively” and “prospectively.”⁵² He says, “It demonstrates the justice of God for the past and in the present, as well as for the future.”⁵³ Verse thirty also supports the redemptive historical interpretation of “but now,” because it is parallel with “in the present time.” The death of Jesus vindicates the righteousness of God for every period of time, showing that He did not and does not simply “wink” at sin, but put His own Son to death in order to purchase salvation for His people.

Conclusion

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Cranfield, *Romans*, 212.

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Derek Tidball, *The Message of the Cross*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 199.

⁵³

Ibid., 199.

If the preceding interpretation of Romans 3:21-26 is correct, then the manifestation of the cross of Christ is based on God's justice, not on His grace. The effect of the cross is grace, but the ground of the cross is justice. This is the central thrust of Paul's meaning. God's saving righteousness in Christ (Rom 3:21-22) is necessary because of God's righteousness in justice (Rom 3:25-26). Law, defined as the need to measure up to God's glorious holy perfections, and gospel, defined in terms of Christ's work of redemption, are shown to be distinct, and the gospel is proven in the above verses to have its foundation in the law. That is, if perfect obedience to God's law and conformity to His character, were not the prerequisite to right standing before God, then there would be no need for the cross and no need for Christ's redemptive work. Furthermore, the work of Christ revealed in Romans 3:21-26 makes no sense at all unless it is understood against the backdrop of "law." Without the law, there can be no theology of the cross. The need of a person to conform to God's perfect holiness and not to "fall short of God's glory," is logically prior to "propitiation." Therefore, speaking generally, the older "Lutheran" conception of the distinction between the law and gospel is more correct than the current trends, which tend to collapse the two into something that is neither the law nor the gospel.