

Sermons through

Romans

The Acropolis of the Christian Faith

Romans 3:21-26

Part 2

With Study Questions

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Part 2

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Introduction

I seldom watch television. A new show has hit my very long list of shows not to watch—a show with a Christian character. He is a simplistic, naïve, hillbilly who, they hint, has the same in-laws as he does blood relatives. In a certain episode they had him singing a worship song, rejoicing how all the people who were born before Jesus went to hell. Clearly the writers of this show were not interested in a detailed analysis of the extent of atoning work of Christ.

One would hope that a moderately intellectual culture might perceive the error of this criticism of the power of the cross of Christ to save, even those who predate the incarnation. Yet at a recent memorial service I was approached by a woman who respectfully, but sternly asked me how people went to heaven before Jesus—prior to the birth, death, resurrection and ascension?

I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that the primary purpose of human history (what theologians might call redemptive history) prior to the birth of Christ was to give instruction in anticipation of the most gracious, holy, magnificent, passionate and powerful event to invade that history. The question of the significance of religion, even the true religion, prior to Christ (meaning His incarnation) is not an altogether illegitimate question. "What value is our religion" they might have asked "if it is Christ alone who saves?"

And what does it mean that God “passed over the sins that were previously committed? And all to what end?” We might ask ourselves similar questions: What value are our religious observations as we gather for church? Why do we view certain elements of worship as so valuable and even necessary? What is the message – the news from heaven that God would have us hear? Does it get our attention? Are we even interested?

Review

This is part two of our examination of this passage which has been hailed as “Acropolis of the Christian faith” the central message of the Scriptures. In verse 21 Paul calls his readers to fix their eyes on the revelation of the **“righteousness of God.”**

...the righteousness of which God is the author, which comes from him, which he gives, and which consequently is acceptable in his sight.¹

It is a righteousness that is **“apart from the law.”** In other words, it is not by human effort, yet it is revealed in **“the Law and the Prophets”** that is, it is the message found in the Old Testament. The means by which this righteousness is accessed is by faith, according to verse 22. When it comes to standing righteous or pardoned before a Holy God, Paul tells us, there is **“no difference”** among men. The need is universal and there is a single answer – Jesus Christ the righteous.

The righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel is to be attained by faith, not by works, not by birth, not by any external rite, not by union with any visible Church, but simply and only by believing on Christ, receiving and resting upon him.²

“For” as Paul will continue **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).** No man can approach the holy mountain of God’s glorious law and live (Exodus 19:12; 20:19)

¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 88

² Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 90

But the glory of God also means to approval of God. We see this in the way Jesus uses the word in the Gospel of John:

...for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:43).

Sinners are “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

Justification (the pardon of God) is gracious – a free gift – but that does not mean there is no cost.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

Paul continues:

...whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed (Romans 3:25).

God Set Forth

May it ever be remembered, in all of our religious wrangling and jockeying for position, that it is God who “set forth” the answer.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. ¹⁷ For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16, 17).

It is God who “gave.” It is God who “set forth” the answer. And the answer set forth is “Christ Jesus” as a “propitiation” *hilasterion*. Propitiation is a big and tricky word. Simply put, it means to appease the wrath. Religion in general, and even certain branches of Christianity, provides ample models and suggestions of how man can mollify what they perceive to be an angry, stingy God. This God, it is subtly suggested, requires sufficient sacrifice,

wisdom, discipline and any other number of human virtues to get Him on our side and paying off. Some might even think, “Sure I’m saved, but what about the rest of my life – my needs, wants, heartaches and difficulties?”

But it is not as if God is some sort of one trick pony – the deity of my justification but sadly lacking in the provision of my daily bread! In my life I may have a doctor, a lawyer, a butcher and a trainer and they each have their expertise. We may view God as excellent in His given trade but coming up short in certain arenas of my life and culture that have clearly fallen into disrepair. Paul will address this childlike shortsightedness later in Romans where he writes:

What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things (Romans 8:31)?

But in order for the child to know he/she has the riches of the household (the “**all things**”), he/she must first know that he/she has the favor of the Father. And how can sinful men know this? Two errors are prevalent: It is common for men take God’s fatherly love for granted or to suppose that God has no interest in us at all. The Old Testament God appeared highly occupied with revealing to men the depth of their sin and the severity of His justice and the method of peace.

Day of Atonement

The most important day in the Old Covenant religious calendar was “The Day of Atonement” *Yom Kippur*. This was a day that the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of all Israel. It was a very dangerous, detailed and complex ceremony. The priest would engage in certain behaviors and wear certain garments to demonstrate his own repentance. He would offer a bull calf as a sin offering for himself and other priests. He would enter the Holy of Holies with a censer of live coals from the altar of incense and begin to sprinkle the blood of the offering on, most notably, the “**mercy seat**” (Leviticus 16)

The mercy seat was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant over which there were golden cherubim. God declared Himself to be enthroned there. It was there that God would meet His people.

And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. ²² There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel (Exodus 25:21, 22).

Prior to Jesus, in a world full of darkness there was one nation through whom God would bring His oracles, His testimony, His commandment – that nation being Israel; and in that nation there was one temple/tabernacle to which God would call His people; and in that temple/tabernacle there was one room (the Holy of Holies) where God would speak in a unique and special way; and in that room there was one small place where He would “**meet**” us.

God would meet us between the two cherubim, with their wings overshadowing the mercy seat – the lid of the Ark which served as a container for the law (what God commands) and the manna (what God provides) and the rod of Aaron (as a sign for rebels) (Exodus 16:33; 25:16; Numbers 17:10). Perhaps another way to categorize the contents of the Ark would be to observe: 1. The prophetic word of God in His testimony; 2. The priestly work of God in the manna; 3. The kingly work of God in the staff.

The Mercy Seat

These are those things the Father would “**set forth**” in His Son as our Prophet, Priest and King. So it should be of no surprise in this dialogue that the word Paul uses to describe what the Father has accomplished in His Son – propitiation *hilasterion* – is the same word translated in the Septuagint as “**mercy seat.**” It is in Christ that we meet the Father. Christ is the Prophet, Christ is the Priest (and also the manna) and Christ is the King. The great human dilemma of sin and death is healed in Christ. And lest we think of Christ as our Advocate and the Father as reluctant, we are reminded that it is the Father who “**set forth**” the Son.

Someone might ask why does Jesus need to be all that? Why can't God simply (as is proposed in virtually every brand of religion) forgive and move on the way we are called to forgive?

Passed Over But Not Winking at Sin

But God is not a winker at sin. He is not like so many courts in the land that **“clear the guilty” (Exodus 34:7)**. God is a just God. The manna does not displace the commandments; they are both in the Ark – anticipating the fulfillment in Christ. It would appear at some level that God was ignoring sin. But Paul explains that God **“in His forbearance...passed over the sins that were previously committed.”**

In other words, prior to Christ, there was a debt that had not yet been paid, but God was unwilling to foreclose on the human race. God had made a promise – an oath that He swore by His own name (Hebrews 6:13-20) – a promise He knew He would keep and that promise was kept when He **“set forth”** His Son. God has now demonstrated **“His righteousness.”** He is not a God who ignores the sins of sinners but **“set forth”** His Son to die for the sins of sinners. And in this, He is both a gracious, merciful God and a holy and just God.

Paul then explains that God has done all this:

...to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Just and Justifier

In Christ, God reconciles the justice of God with the demands of the law in such a way that can be seen nowhere else and by no one else. Maybe it doesn't seem like a big deal in a world where religion is packaged like a product designed entirely to massage the knots in the consumer's neck. And certainly, there will come a time when the knots of human sorrow will be displaced by the joy of eternal union with Christ for those who believe – for **“the one who has faith in Jesus.”**

But we might wish to consider, if we are willing to think a little deeper – that just perhaps, the purpose of this life is for God to demonstrate He is both the **“just and the justifier.”** Could it be that the whole purpose of this fallen existence is for God to create a venue to display His own justice?

Questions for Study

1. Why do you suppose this passage is called “The Acropolis of the Christian Faith” (pages 2-4)?
2. What does it mean to have a righteousness that is “apart from the law” (page 3)?
3. Define “the glory of God” (pages 3, 4).
4. How is one “justified?” What does this mean (page 4)?
5. Who “set forth” the answer to man’s dilemma? What is the answer? What are some of the answers we see proposed in this world (pages 4, 5)?
6. How can one know they have the Fatherly favor of God (page 5)?
7. What does the Day of Atonement tell us about the work of Christ (pages 5, 6)?
8. How does the “mercy seat” extend our thoughts to Christ (page 6)?
9. God “passed over” the sins previously committed. Does this mean He ignored those sins? Explain (page 7).
10. How is God both “just and justifier?” How is this significant (page 7)?