

# How a person can be right with God

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## How a person can be right with God

*A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church in the morning service by Henry Dixon on 30th September 2007*

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. 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. Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:20-31)

## Introduction

This morning I am going to take a break from the part of Romans we have been going through in recent weeks, in order to go back to a passage a few chapters earlier, namely Romans 3.20 - 31. This passage is really the foundation of all that we have been seeing in chapters 12 to 14, because it deals with the very heart of the Gospel. It speaks about how guilty sinners such as ourselves can be “justified” before God, that is, declared to be “not guilty”, so that we may be friends with God.

Now I am aware that I spoke from this passage in February of this year. But there is quite a probability that a number of those who are here this morning were not there then. It is also more than likely that even if you were present then you need to be reminded of these fundamental truths that I am going to speak about today.

Why do you need to listen to what I am going to say today? The answer is, to put it bluntly, that if you do not understand and believe the truths that I am going to talk about today, you will not be a true Christian. And if you are not a true Christian, you will spend an eternity in Hell, in unspeakable and unending torment. If, on the other hand, you have previously understood and believed these truths, and you are a true Christian, you still need to be reminded of the truths. It is very easy to lose sight of these truths, even if you are a true Christian who has previously believed them. When this happens you become self-righteous, proud, miserable, hyper-critical, lacking in assurance, without hope, and easily tempted into sin.

So I hope everyone, Christian or not yet Christian, will pay very close attention to what I am going to say this morning.

The passage is about how a person can be “justified” before God. To be “justified” means to be declared not guilty. It is absolutely essential that a person is justified if he is to have a relationship with God and eternal life, because God is holy, without any sin at all. He will not have in his presence those who are unclean in his sight. The problem of how to be justified before God lies at the root of all religions. In their different ways, all world religions are offering solutions to this problem. This is where true Christianity according to the Bible is so different from all other religions. Other religions say, albeit in different ways, that the way to be justified before God is to try to be good, to be religious, and to hope thereby to pay for such sins as you have. What this passage says is that it is impossible to get to God that way, because our sins are **so** bad and he is **so** pure. We cannot justify ourselves. Instead we have to be justified by God himself. This is possible through what Jesus did on the Cross. We have simply to put our trust in Christ. When we do so, we are instantaneously and for ever justified before God.

Let us now look at the passage in a bit more detail.

## **1. We are *not* justified, declared not guilty, by our works**

The first thing to see is how we are *not* justified, how we are *not* declared not guilty. Verse 20 says in our translation, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law." The English Standard Version puts it like this, "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight."

Our works which we try to do to obey the law of God, the commandments in the Old and New Testaments, will never justify us before God. Instead, all that the law of God does is to expose our sin. The Old Testament testifies to the righteousness of God and what he requires of us, but the commands of God do not provide a way for us to have this righteousness. Verse 20 goes on to say, "Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." All the commands do is to show up more clearly just how sinful we are. They act as a mirror, to show us the dirt and imperfections in our lives. They act as a searchlight to search out the corruption and wickedness in our hearts. But trying to obey the law of God cannot make us good in God's sight.

The reason for this is found a few verses earlier. Look back at verse 10. "There is no one righteous, not even one." How many good people are there in the world? None. Verse 11 continues, "There is no-one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless."

All of us have broken God's law. We have not loved and worshipped God as we should have loved him, but instead have worshipped the idols of our family, our jobs, our homes, our cars, our motorbikes, our comforts and pleasures. And we have not loved each other as we should have done. We are rude, we tell lies, we get wrongly angry, we are unkind, boastful, arrogant, lustful and argumentative.

Sometimes people say, "Well, I know I am not perfect. But I try to do good deeds to make up for my bad deeds." The problem is, we do not have any good deeds to offer God. Isaiah chapter 64 verse 6 says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags".

Some people feel that as long as you are not *really* bad, you will be OK. But Jesus said that just one bad deed is enough to put you in Hell. It is recorded in Matthew 5.22 that he said, "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." Have you ever insulted anyone, or been rude to someone? Then, according to Jesus, you are fit for Hell.

You might say, "But I am sure that my life is better than the lives of many other

people. I am not a murderer or a rapist. Surely God is going to be pleased with me for doing better than others." I will not argue with you about whether your life is better than other peoples' lives. The problem with your position is that God does not judge you by the standard of the average. He judges you by the standard of his own perfection.

Suppose you are at Canary Wharf one day. As you are walking down the street, along comes a man who is seven foot six tall. You might say to yourself "I have seen a giant of a man!" But suppose that, at the same time, your friend is at the top of one of the sky scrapers there. Later that day you say to your friend, "Did you see that amazing man? He was so tall!" What will your friend say? "From up where I was everybody seemed more or less the same." From our vantage point down here, some people's lives seem to be particularly good, and some particularly bad. But from God's vantage point, from the standard of his perfection, we all seem pretty much the same, all sinners.

## **2. We can be justified (counted as righteous) only by God**

This second truth must follow from the first point. If we cannot justify ourselves, the only one who can do so is God.

Verse 21 reads, "Now a righteousness *from God* is revealed." What good news! This means that now there is a way of being counted as righteous which does not come from us but from God himself.

Verse 22 reads "This righteousness *from God* comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe". It is a righteousness that comes from God, not us.

Then again consider verse 24: "We *are* justified freely". This means that we are **now** counted as righteous. God causes this to happen immediately! The verse does not say, "will be justified" but "are justified". The moment a person truly trusts in Christ he is for ever justified.

The amazing part is that this justification is a free gift. You do not earn it or try to pay for it. It is such a costly and precious gift no one could ever hope to earn it by their own efforts. You simply receive it as a free gift. God provides it freely, by his grace.

One wrong idea that many people have is: "God helps those who help

themselves. We trust him, but we try as well. We need to contribute something. It is wrong to take it without having paid for it."

This passage shows that this common idea is completely mistaken because our salvation must be all of God, none of us. One popular hymn that we sing very often is "Rock of Ages". One of the verses of this hymn runs like this:

Not the labours of my hands  
Can fulfil thy law's demands  
Could my zeal no respite know  
Could my tears for ever flow  
All for sin could not atone  
Thou must save, and you alone.

The message of this hymn, in line with the passage in Romans 3, is that we must abandon all self-effort and depend on the righteousness that God provides to make us right with himself.

### **3. God justifies his people (counts them as righteous) through what Jesus did on the Cross.**

How can God declare sinners to be righteous, without their being an outcry? How can he overlook all our sins without compromising his righteousness? How can he count us as good without lowering his standard? Verse 22 of Romans 3 gives the answer: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

What did Jesus do to make this possible? Verse 24 tells us. "... (all) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Have you ever been to the pawnbroker? You have a really valuable and precious ring which you do not want to be parted from but because there is a pressing financial need you take your ring to the pawnbroker anyway, hoping to redeem it in a week or two when your financial difficulties have been resolved. That ring is held in captivity in the pawnbrokers until you are able to go in and rescue or redeem it with money. In the same way, God has redeemed his people, not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ.

How has God redeemed us? Verse 25 tells us that God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. A better translation of

“sacrifice of atonement” is “propitiation”. This means “someone who turns aside the anger of another person that was directed towards a third party.” Our essential problem as human beings is God is angry with us. He has wrath towards us because of our sin. That anger of God has got to be satisfied. It is not going to be exhausted by anything that we can do. God will not have anything to do with us until his anger against our sin has been poured out. If that anger were to be poured out against you or me, it would take all eternity to satisfy the amount of anger that God has towards our sin. But as Jesus died on the cross, God poured out his wrath onto his own Son, Jesus, for the sin of everybody who trusts in him. That is how Jesus has provided a propitiation for our sins. He is the one who carried the anger of God on our behalf. When we come to him, the wrath that was against us is turned aside and laid on him instead.

#### **4. We receive what God has done for us by faith alone**

Read verse 22 again. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe”. Again, in verses 25 and 26, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.....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.” It is through faith, through trusting in what Jesus did on our behalf, that we are put right with God.

Note, it is by faith *alone* that we are justified before God. Verse 28 says, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart from observing the law.*” Many people get confused about this. They think that you start off as a Christian by faith but continue by works in order to keep on as a member of God’s people and to ensure that you have a place in heaven. A subtle variation on this theme is when some say that we enter the “covenant community” by faith, but then we have to do works to stay right with God. Such people confuse the doctrine of sanctification with the doctrine of justification. A true believer, of course, will start to obey God. But this is the result of justification, not the grounds of it.

Paul asserts clearly in this passage that once a person believes for himself in what Jesus did on the cross, *from that moment* he is declared *forever* not guilty in the sight of God.

So the one thing we must do is to depend on Jesus and his work on the Cross. If you do this, God will count you as not guilty in his sight. As the hymn I quoted

earlier says,

Nothing in my hand I bring  
Simply to Thy cross I cling  
Naked come to Thee for dress  
Helpless look to Thee for grace  
Foul I to the fountain fly  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!

## **5. Implications of this truth**

What does this lead to in a person's life? The implications are found in Romans 3.27 – 31. First, there will be no boasting. "Where then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle. On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith." You cannot continue with boasting when you believe the message of the Cross because you realise that the only reason you will go to heaven is because God has completely provided your salvation through Jesus, and not through anything you have done. We sang earlier:

When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

When you realise that you have not been saved by your works or your efforts, you realise you have no grounds on which to boast or to feel proud.

Secondly, you also realise there are no grounds for racism. Verse 29 tells us clearly that all men, from whatever background, race or nation are justified on the same basis and by the same God. The apostle says, "Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes of the Gentiles too, since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised by that through that same faith."

Are you black or white, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, living in a big mansion or a small flat, do you drive around in a big car or do you not have a car? It makes no difference. You can only be justified by Jesus and what he did, so there can be no basis for snobbery or differences between human beings. No Christian can think himself superior or above other people. We are all sinners who have to come to God the same way, through faith in Jesus and his death on

our behalf.

The third implication which we see from verse 31 is that we live a life of obedience. Paul says, "Do we, then, nullify law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law". Some people think that the truth I have spoken about today is a very dangerous idea. They think that if you teach this then people will live very immoral lives. They say that people will reason that if you are justified by faith in Christ and not by works means that there is no point in obeying the law of God. If you are saved anyway you might as well live how you want.

In fact it is the exact opposite. If a man truly believes that Jesus died in his place, so he will not go to Hell as he deserves but will live gloriously in heaven by God's free grace, then he will want to obey God's law. He does so not because he hopes thereby to earn a place in heaven, but because he knows he has already been given a place. Such a man lives in accordance with God's law because he wants to say thank you to the Lord Jesus Christ for what he has done.

## **Final appeal**

Today we seen the following things:

We are not justified, declared not guilty by what we do

We can only be justified by God.

Justification is possible through the death of Jesus on the Cross which turned aside God's wrath.

It is by faith alone that we receive God's justification.

To conclude, let me ask you these questions. Is Christ *your* Saviour? Have you trusted in him that he died for *yoursins*?

You might answer yes, for definite. If so, praise God! Rejoice in what God has done for you. Give him all the glory and live a life of obedience to God in gratitude to him.

Or you might answer "Definitely, no". Well, do not put it off. Do not leave it. For the sake of your immortal soul, make sure you come to Christ.



Or you might answer that you are not sure. This is not a matter you can afford to be uncertain about. **You must make sure.** Come to Jesus and definitely close with him. Ask Jesus to save you today and make sure.

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