

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WEEK OF MAY 5 - 11

Message Title: HOW TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD

Message Text: ROMANS 3:9-26

Before Your Small Group Meeting:

- Watch Pastor Mark's Message
- Read Romans 3:9-26

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is one thing that challenged you from the message this week?
2. Pastor Mark said that the law is more of a mirror than a map. What did he mean by this and how does it guide you in your pursuit of holiness?
3. Mark shared 5 salvation word pictures. What were they and was there one you had never heard before?
4. Read James 2:14-17. How does this passage speak into Mark's definition of faith...Diving heart first into God's promises?
5. How will these 5 salvation word pictures help you in sharing the gospel with family, friends, and co-workers?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Commentary on Romans 3:9-26

3:9. In his diatribe format, the answer to Paul's final response coming from his fictitious questioner could be challenged as contradictory to his answer in 3:1. Paul has said that there are advantages to being a Jew (Rom. 3:1-2), but that those advantages do not include being excused from judgment. Therefore, the Jews ask, **Are we any better?** to which Paul replies, **Not at all!** Well, if advantages do not mean we are better off, then what do they mean? The advantage to being a Jew is access to God's special revelation and the blessings that come from responding obediently to it. But being better off (in the sense that Paul knew the Jews would be asking)? No, because Jews are going to be judged by the same righteous standards as Gentiles—and in fact, more scrupulously because of their advantages!

Paul's declaration that both Jew and Gentile alike are **all under sin** is only the first of three declarations about who God judges. The other two witnesses are the Old Testament and the law itself. As if concluding this section of his epistle in a courtroom, Paul brings compelling evidence to show the Jews that *all*—everyone in the world—is guilty of sin and will be judged accordingly.

3:10-18. The second witness, beside the apostle himself, is the Old Testament. The corpus of special revelation which formed the Jews' advantage (Rom. 3:1-2) turns out to be the strongest witness against them. From the Psalms, Isaiah, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs come the seminal thoughts that Paul "quotes" in order to show the Jews one thing: the texts which God committed to them for the purpose of being a light to the Gentiles have now been turned upon them. It is as if someone grabbed their sword out of their hand—the sword by which they were to fight their way through the darkness of this world—and killed them with it. Not with anger or vitriol does Paul bring the testimony of Scripture against them. In fact, even if they had been manifestly successful at obeying God for all their generations, the verses he cites would still be true. It is just that he would not have to be hurting them by reminding them; they would have been humbled by the reality of their own sin and would not have needed the apostle to the Gentiles to call them to account.

"Righteous" Jews or unrighteous Jews, **all have turned away ... there is no one who does good, not even one.** That is true generally, and it is true specifically: **throats ... tongues ... lips ... mouths ... feet ... eyes** are all guilty, going their own way. The senses and sensibilities of humans—both Gentile and Jew—have validated the Word of God.

3:19-20. Paul declared that all have sinned (3:9). The Old Testament declares that all have sinned (3:10-18). And finally, the law declares that all have sinned (3:19-20). **The law** here has a dual reference in Paul's words. First, it simply refers to the verses he has just quoted, showing that the law speaks to **those who are under the law**. Paul is not asking the Jews to give heed to the sacred writings of some other religion, but to their own. If you claim these writings, he says, then receive their claim upon your life. Do not own them without letting them own you. Receive their verdict without objection.

Second, however, Paul says that the law's purpose is to let you know that the law cannot make you righteous. Rather, it is **through the law [that] we become conscious of sin**. In other words,

when the law says, "Do this or that," it is really saying, "You can't do this or that." The law wants you to know that you are guilty of not being able to keep it, and that your righteousness will never have its source in the law. The law tells you of your unrighteousness; the gospel tells you of the righteousness of God.

Paul has concluded his words concerning his beloved kinsman (Rom. 10:1-3). He has brought the church at Rome to the point where they understand that they are unrighteous (Jew and Gentile), the Romans are unrighteous, the "barbarians" in Spain and beyond are unrighteous, that **there is no one righteous, not even one** (3:10). He is now ready to tell them who is righteous—God alone—and more importantly, how a bridge may be built upon which they may move from their unrighteousness to the righteousness of God. This he will do beginning in 3:21—"a righteousness from God ... has been made known."

3:21. Paul got the bad news over with first in his letter to the Romans. From 1:18 through 3:20 he painted a drastic, but accurate and realistic, picture of the spiritual and moral condition of the human race. **But now** he begins to paint a picture that is altogether different and better. "But now" is one of Paul's favorite contrasting conjunctions. Sixteen times in his epistles he uses the *nuni de* construction to bring his readers up sharply and prepare them for a contrast, and many of those times the NIV renders it as here, **but now** (e.g., Rom. 6:22; 7:6; 15:23; Eph. 2:13; Col. 1:22). Good cases can be made for Paul thinking temporally ("but now in this age of righteousness, beginning with the death of Christ") or logically ("but now, in stark contrast to the unrighteousness of humankind, the righteousness of God has been made known"). Both aspects contain truth.

The logical use could not be more obvious, but the temporal element is present in Paul as well; see 2 Corinthians 6:2 where he refers to the "day of salvation" that has come in Christ (cf. *idou nun ... idou nun*—"I tell you, now ... now" with *nuni de*, **but now**). Either way, **but now** lets his Roman readers know that Paul is shifting to a new theme. And what a theme it is!

In Romans 1:17, Paul said that "in the gospel a righteousness from God is [being] revealed." This is a present tense, ongoing reality. Whenever and wherever the gospel is preached, "a righteousness from God is revealed" through the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ. Here, he picks up the theme of a **righteousness from God** again, but this time says that it **has been made known**. Here Paul uses the perfect tense, pointing to an action in the past with results continuing into the present—without doubt he refers to the death of Christ. Since the death of Christ, God's righteousness **has been made known**—but **apart from law**. Before the death of Christ, God's righteousness was revealed according to law, as it was law which revealed the righteous standards of God ("And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God ... that will be our righteousness"; Deut. 6:25). But now it is revealed **apart from the law**.

Reformed scholar John Murray stresses the absence of the law in the present manifestation of God's righteousness: "When Paul says 'without the law' the absoluteness of this negation must not be toned down. He means this without any reservation or equivocation in reference to the justifying righteousness which is the theme of this part of the epistle. This implies that in justification there is no contribution, preparatory, accessory, or subsidiary, that is given by works of law.... To overlook this accent is to miss the central message of this epistle. To equivocate here is to distort what could not be more plainly and consistently stated" (Murray, p. 109).

However, Paul himself will say at the end of this section that, even now, "we uphold the law" (3:31)—but not as a means of justification. He told the Galatians that the law was "put in charge to

lead us to Christ" but that "now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Gal. 3:24-25). The problem with righteousness being revealed according to law is that no one could attain to the righteousness that the law required (see Rom. 9:30). In other words, "all have sinned" (3:23).

Yet even in the Old Testament, the righteousness of God was revealed apart from the law, and both **the Law and the Prophets testify** accordingly. The church father John Chrysostom pointed out that "Paul does not say that the righteousness of God has been *given* but that it has been *manifested*, thus destroying the accusation that it is something new. For what is manifested is old but previously concealed. He reinforces this point by going on to mention that the Law and Prophets had foretold it" (Bray, p. 99).

The Law and the Prophets was common parlance for the entire Old Testament. Jesus used the phrase (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:27, 44) as did Luke (Acts 13:15) and Paul on other occasions (Acts 24:14; 26:22; 28:23). **The Law** referred to the first five books of Moses, and **the Prophets** to everything else (the major and minor prophets as well as the historical books and "the Writings"—the wisdom literature; Matthew even refers to a quote from Psalm 78:2 as being "spoken through the prophet"; Matt. 13:35). But how did **the Law and the Prophets testify** to the righteousness from God that **has [now] been made known?**

In the next chapter, Paul will use Abraham as an example of a "Gentile" who found righteousness from God apart from the law. Abraham serves as the linchpin of his argument that righteousness comes only by faith (see also Gal. 3:6-25). Abraham's experience with God is the practical example of everything that Paul is so meticulously laying out in Romans 3-4. Paul, in essence, is lecturing in the courtroom of justice, explaining exactly how it is possible that what we see in Abraham's life could take place.

Remember—Abraham was a pure-bred Gentile when he met God (as was everyone in the world; there were no Jews before Abraham!), devoid of faith and devoid of righteousness. When God led him from his home in Ur of Mesopotamia, Abraham had little to go on but faith. Blind faith actually, since he had no idea where God was taking him. But as his relationship with God developed (430 years before the law was given, Paul tells us in Gal. 3:17), he learned to trust, to believe God.

And so we find in Genesis 15:6 the essence of the Pauline argument: "Abraham believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." There is **righteousness from God** being revealed (credited) apart from the law, "through faith" (v. 22). For Abraham, it was not "faith in Jesus Christ" (v. 22) at that point. But as the Law was given through Moses, and it became obvious that the sacrifices prescribed by the law had to be repeated annually, that the forgiveness God granted for sin was in anticipation of a better sacrifice to come.

The Prophets also testified of a righteousness apart from the law. One of Paul's theme verses (Rom. 1:17) quotes Habakkuk 2:4: "The righteous will live by his faith." Not "by the law," but "by his faith." Peter, when speaking to the Gentiles in Cornelius's house, said that "all the prophets testify about [Christ] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). There it is again: the prophets talking about faith as a means to forgiveness. Perhaps Peter had Isaiah 53:11 in mind: "After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities." Or perhaps he was thinking of the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the child, the son that was to be

born, upon whose shoulders the government would rest, whose kingdom would manifest justice and righteousness forever (Isa. 9:6-7).

Righteousness by faith, righteousness in a person, was a consistent, if not totally understood and detailed, theme of the Old Testament prophets. And Paul is telling the Gentile and Jewish believers in Rome that his gospel is the gospel that brings to fruition that righteousness from God first proved by the law, then revealed by the prophets—the righteousness that can only come by faith.

B. Righteousness: Comes Through Faith (3:22-24)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Because all have sinned, all can be justified freely by God's grace through Jesus Christ.*

In verses 22-24, Paul introduces a thought so contrary to Jewish and Gentile sensibilities as to be scandalous—an example of the clash of kingdoms at its best. The idea that the wicked could be **justified freely** was unheard of, not only in Rome but also in Israel. The iron-booted authority of Rome not only condemned the guilty but probably a lot who were innocent as well. But the eye-for-an-eye heritage of Paul's Jewish readers would likewise be brought to attention by his forthcoming words (though there were sufficient examples of grace and mercy in the Old Testament, e.g., David the king, had they been desirous of incorporating it into their worldview).

"Acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty" (Deut. 25:1; see also Exod. 23:7) was the norm in Israel. If the guilty party was acquitted, it was often because an official had been bribed (Isa. 5:23). Paul's gospel was bringing an entirely new way of administering justice. Since everyone is guilty (Rom. 2:10), everyone deserves to be condemned in order for God to be just. God would become as unrighteous as the guilty if he overlooked their sins and did not condemn them. But what the world did not count on was a God who was both just *and* a justifier of the guilty. No one goes free without the penalty being paid. It is just that no one imagined that the judge would also pay the price.

Think of the millions upon millions of people in our world today who labor under consciences burdened by guilt. We know they do because Paul has told us their thoughts accuse them (Rom. 2:15) when they break God's laws. And think of the mental machinations they must go through, contemplating what to do about that which they have done wrong (we can know how they think because it is how we thought before receiving God's pardon). And then think what this guilt-removing gospel of grace could do to liberate them from the present and eternal penalties of sin!

When the heart of Paul's gospel, which is found in these three verses, becomes ever clearer in the eyes of teacher and preacher, there will be no end to the setting free of captives. Paul knew it, and wanted to free the spiritual captives not only in Rome but in Spain and beyond. And he wanted all who read his letter to the Romans to join him in revealing the **righteousness from God** which can become the righteousness man so desperately longs for and needs.

3:22. First, Paul says that **faith** is the key to receiving God's righteousness. Do not forget to connect this verse, and what Paul is declaring, with his original statement about the "righteousness from God" in 1:17. Think of it this way: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith (1:17) ... [and by the way, all are in need of this righteousness, whether Jew or Gentile (1:18-3:20)] ... **This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe** (3:22)."

That is the essence of what Paul has said in Romans so far. Looked at another way:

I am writing, and coming to visit you, to minister the gospel to you.

The gospel reveals what the world needs more than it needs anything else: righteousness. The human race has forfeited its own righteousness (more about that in Romans 5) and can only look to God to regain righteous standing before him.

Contrary to the sanctimonious attempts of the Jews, and the bungled religiosity of the Gentiles, the only way to gain this righteousness is by faith in Jesus Christ. Forget everything else—faith is the key to standing on righteous ground before God.

And who can receive this righteousness? **All who believe. There is no difference.** We know that this is true when we look ahead to the closing chapters of the redemption story and see people “from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9; see also 5:9; 14:6). The church of Jesus Christ should be the greatest force in the world for breaking down racial and ethnic barriers—and often it is. Unfortunately, the stories of the love of God pulling down centuries-old walls of division often go unheard. Instead, the news is filled with years of strife between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or uneasy truces between black and white Christians in the American South. But Paul says that **there is no difference**. None is better than another. All receive righteousness the same way, **through faith in Jesus Christ**.

All men and women are made equal by three things: first, our equality in need (all are guilty). Second, our equality in what we receive (redemption is one gift; the same for all). Third, our equality in how we receive redemption (by faith; everyone receives it the same way). Equality in Christ represents a radical message from one who formerly prided himself on his rung on the ladder of racial respectability.

Combining Paul’s words here (and in Rom. 10:12 and 1 Cor. 12:13) with those in Galatians (3:28), Colossians (3:11), and John’s in Revelation (5:9; 7:9; 14:6), here are the differences common in Paul’s day which the gospel ignores: Jew, Gentile, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, male, female, language, ethnicity, racial stock, and tribe (people group). To these, we could add the differences that have become important in our day: weak, powerful, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, economically developed, economically deprived, sophisticated, or plain. Why do none of these distinctives matter in the eyes of God?

3:23. Note Paul’s declaration, **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. The English bishop, Handley Moule, perhaps has put Paul’s words in the most telling way of all: “The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of [God’s glory]; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they” (Stott, p. 109). The great deception, of course, comes when those on the Alps fail to see that their microcosmic advantage over their fellows in degrees of behavior removes their feet not an inch from the corrupt moral ground that they, and the worst sinner, stand on together.

Failure in a moral sense is the cause for righteousness having to come from God, according to Paul here. Jews and Gentiles have “all sinned” (aorist tense; a snapshot in time of the condition of the human race) and continue to **fall short** (present tense; a moving picture, a film, a video showing the continual failure of man to reflect the glory of God). When Paul says here that **all have sinned** (*pantes ... hemarton*), he uses the same Greek words as he does in 5:12 when discussing

the entrance of sin into the world through Adam, the father of the human race: "all sinned" (*pantes hemarton*).

To separate the two aorist phrases (both describe conditions), think of the 3:23 **all have sinned** as an "Activity Aorist" and the 5:12 "all sinned" as an "Adamic Aorist" (these are not in your Greek grammar!). In light of Paul's present tense **fall short** in 3:23, and in light of his just-concluded recitations of the actual sins of Jews and Gentiles, it seems that the **all have sinned** in 3:23 is a picture of mankind's sinful characteristics. The 5:12 "all sinned," on the other hand, seems to be a picture of mankind's inherited character as a sinner. In other words, by 5:12 Paul will have said that as descendants of Adam, mankind is a sinner and proves it by sinning. All of which causes him to **fall short of the glory of God**.

The concept of "falling short" of the **glory of God** is a good description of our modern Western cultures. The verb (*hustereo*) has root meanings of "come late," "be behind," "come short," deriving from the adverb for "latter" or "later." In other words, the image here is not one of absence, but one of always being behind. For the schedule-driven and time-warped modern, it is not difficult to conceive of what it means to constantly "be behind" in life's activities. We are in the race; we just do not ever win.

This image suggests something of what it means to **fall short of the glory of God**. Regardless of what we do we never seem to catch up to the **glory of God**; we are always behind. Meaning, because of our sin ("Adamic Aorist"), our sins ("Activity Aorist") constantly cause smudges to appear where glory should shine through. God's image, to be continually reflected in the earth through the creatures that bear its glory, is defaced and marred. Try as we might—good works, noble thoughts, kind gestures—we might as well, as Bishop Moule put it, be standing in the Alps trying to touch a star. We will always fall short. (On the glory of God in man see Gen. 1:26–28; Ps. 8:5–6; Isa. 43:7; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Heb. 2:5–9; 1 John 3:2.)

It is the **all** of verse 23 that levels the playing field of the gospel. Since **all have sinned**, then all need justification. And since all need justification, all can have it—but only one way: **through faith in Jesus Christ**. John Wesley summarized well Paul's words up to this point: "Ye are saved (to comprise all in one word) from sin. This is the salvation which is through faith. This is that great salvation foretold by the angel, before God brought his first-begotten into the world: 'Thou shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.' And neither here, nor in other parts of Holy Writ, is there any limitation or restriction. All his people, or as it is elsewhere expressed, 'all that believe in him,' he will save from all their sins; from original and actual, past and present sin, 'of the flesh and of the spirit.' Through faith that is in him, they are saved both from the guilt and from the power of it" (*Heritage*, p. 201).

3:24. The key to receiving God's righteousness—a righteous standing in his sight—is faith. The cause for God's having to provide righteousness for humankind is moral failure on our part. And now, Paul reveals the cost to those who are justified—it is provided free: **[we] are justified freely by his grace**.

What is free for us was not free for God, for we are justified **through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**. The price God paid for our justification was incalculable, in that it involved the sacrifice of his Son. And it is also an offense to the human ego, as Oswald Chambers has observed: "There is a certain pride in people that causes them to give and give, but to come and accept a gift is another thing. I will give my life to martyrdom; I will dedicate my life to service—I will

do anything. But do not humiliate me to the level of the most hell-deserving sinner and tell me that all I have to do is accept the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ" (Chambers, *My Utmost*, Nov. 28).

What does it mean that we **are justified**? It does not mean that God looks at me "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned. Hortatory hokum at best, it is bad theology at worst that drastically discounts what God has done in Jesus Christ. When God justifies—declares righteous—a guilty sinner, two things happen: negatively, the sinner is declared no longer guilty of sin. Positively, the sinner is declared righteous. Not *made* righteous, but *declared* righteous. God cancels out the debt of guilt that is on the sinner's account and then credits righteousness to his or her account. Both actions must take place for justification to occur. To say that, once justified, God looks at sinners as if they had never sinned, discounts the worth of the sacrifice God offered to forgive our sin.

Charles Swindoll explains it this way: after a day of dirty yard work, a hot shower and a bar of soap renders one clean. It is tempting to say, " 'Ah, it's just as if I'd never been dirty.' But that would not have adequately conveyed the power and the value of the water and soap. Better to look in the mirror and say, 'I was filthy and now I'm clean' " (Swindoll, p. 327). All one need do is look back in the first two chapters of Romans to realize exactly how much sin was cancelled and how much grace is required to declare sinners righteous. John Newton had it right in "Amazing Grace," when he marveled at the grace that "saved a wretch like me."

Paul uses forms of "justification" more than twenty times in Romans and Galatians. It is at the heart of the gospel. And the heart of justification is the crediting of one person's righteousness to the account of another. When Paul illustrates justification in Romans 4, he will use forms of the word "credit" ten times in that one chapter alone to drive home the point that our justification is a free gift. The righteousness of God, specifically that of his Son Jesus Christ, has been credited to the account of all who believe in him and what he accomplished by his death and resurrection. Why did God have to transfer the righteousness of Christ to our account? Because we have none of our own. We are totally unrighteous; Christ is totally righteous.

Everett Harrison explains why we are **justified freely by his grace** and illuminates the bankrupt nature of our own accounts. **Freely** is *dorean*, an adverb from *dorea*, a gift. Interestingly, *dorean* is used in John 15:25 when Jesus is characterizing those who hate him: "They hated me without reason (*dorean*)." When Paul says that we are **justified freely**, he is saying that we are "justified without reason" insofar as reasons that exist in the sinner. "God finds no reason, no basis, in the sinner for declaring him righteous. He must find the cause in himself" (Harrison, p. 42). Justification "expresses the judicial action of God apart from human merit according to which the guilty are pardoned, acquitted, and then reinstated as God's children and as fellow heirs with Jesus Christ" (Boice, *Galatians*, p. 449).

The motivation for God's justification of guilty sinners is **grace**. As has been rightly said, "If mercy is not getting what we do deserve, grace is getting what we don't deserve." Blaise Pascal said that "grace is indeed needed to turn a man into a saint, and he who doubts it does not know what a saint or a man is" (Ward, p. 130). Only grace could declare an unrighteous sinner righteous. The well-worn phrase, "But for the grace of God, there go I" regains its strength when one understands that the person who said it first was watching guilty criminals going to their death on the gallows. Perhaps John Bradford, the sixteenth-century English Protestant martyr, had Romans 3:24

in mind when, watching the death march, he said, “But for the grace of God there goes John Bradford” (Ward, p. 88).

The grace of God in our salvation was when God interrupted the death march, took us out of line, and took our place. As Deitrich Bonhoeffer reminds the church, “Grace is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life” (Ward, p. 205).

Justification comes through **redemption that came by Christ Jesus**. Fortunately, “redemption” was a term not lost on either Jews or Gentiles, for it was a term of the slave market. Historians believe that the population of first-century Rome was probably more than half slaves, so Gentiles in the church at Rome understood **redemption**—the process whereby a slave’s freedom is purchased for a ransom price. For the Jews, in addition to having statutes governing the redemption of slaves (Lev. 25:47–53), their entire salvific history was bound up in their redemption out of slavery in Egypt (Exod. 15:13; Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5 15:15; Neh. 1:10; Pss. 77:15; 78:42; Isa. 43:1; Mic. 6:4). What was new for both classes of humanity was that there is a slavery that all people are subject to for which there is only one ransom price.

Jesus himself confronted the Jews on this issue when they declared they were no one’s slaves: “Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin’ ” (John 8:34). This is the redemption that the gospel proclaims—freedom from slavery to sin purchased by the ransom price of Christ’s own death.

C. Righteousness: Demonstrates God’s Justice (3:25–26)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *God justifies the wicked by being both the judge and the sacrifice for sin.*

Paul’s concern now is to answer the question, “How can God himself be called righteous, or just, if he simply declares the wicked righteous?” And it is a good question. The same God who seems to be holding sinners accountable for their wickedness appears not to be holding himself accountable with the same consistency. Imagine if a judge arbitrarily decided to pronounce a group of guilty lawbreakers innocent and reinstated them as members in good standing of the community. That judge would be guilty of the same inconsistency (injustice) that God could be accused of if he did a similar thing. Is that what he did when he “justified freely” those who sinned? It is Paul’s purpose to demonstrate that while God is indeed **the one who justifies**, he is also **just** in doing so.

3:25a. Few passages of Scripture have had more ink spilled over them by theologians than Romans 3:25a. Critical commentaries are filled with the technical discussions that revolve around the meaning of the word *hilasterion*, translated in the NIV as “sacrifice of atonement,” and in other translations as “propitiation” (e.g., KJV, NASB, NKJV). In our “Deeper Discoveries” section, we will comment on some of the finer points of this discussion, but here stay focused on the bigger picture, which is the role of the *hilasterion* in God’s justifying of sinners. When God **presented** Jesus Christ as a *hilasterion*, “he did this to demonstrate his justice” (v. 25b). There is the crux of the issue raised in the question outlined above—the need to explain how God can justify sinners and remain just himself.

Here is the heart of the matter: when Paul calls Christ a *hilasterion*, he uses a Greek word which the translators of the Greek version of the Old Testament used more than twenty times to translate the Hebrew *kapporeth*. The *kapporeth* was the covering of the ark of the covenant in the holy of

holies in the tabernacle and temple. As outlined in Leviticus 16, the high priest was to take the blood of the sacrificial bull (v. 14) and goat (v. 15) and sprinkle it on the cover of the ark of the covenant (*kapporeth*) in order to make atonement (*kipper*) for himself, his household, and the people. The ark of the covenant contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments representing God's moral and righteous standards which had been broken. But when the sacrificial animals were killed and their blood sprinkled over the cover of the ark, the broken laws of God were atoned for by the death of the animals instead of the death of the Israelites.

Leviticus 17 goes on to point out two critical factors: first, life is in the blood, and second, God initiated the sacrifice (v. 11). Therefore, God took it upon himself to initiate the exchange of life by the shedding of blood: the life of a "sinless" animal for the life of a sinless human.

When Paul then says that Christ became a *hilasterion*, he could be saying that Christ became the "mercy seat" (Heb. 9:5 NASB; "atonement cover," NIV) or he could be using the term simply to represent the atoning sacrifice (or propitiation) for our sins since in the tabernacle the sprinkling of sacrificial blood "turned away" (propitiated) the wrath of God. In either case, it is clear that Christ became the sinless sacrifice prefigured by the Old Testament sacrifices. And the effect on God's standards of righteousness? His standards were totally satisfied, allowing him to free those (redeem those) who were slaves in the marketplace of sin.

F. F. Bruce summarizes nicely by noting, "Paul has thus pressed into service the language of the lawcourt ('justified'), the slave-market ('redemption') and the altar ('expiation,' 'atoning sacrifice') in the attempt to do justice to the fullness of God's gracious act in Christ. Pardon, liberation, atonement—all are made available to men and women by his free initiative and may be appropriated by faith" (Bruce, pp. 101-102).

By believing in (having faith in) the efficacy of **his blood**, and the covering of God's broken law, a sinner is able to appropriate (have applied to his or her account) the righteous standing (the sinlessness) of the sacrifice, **Christ Jesus**. Do not forget that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven" (Rom. 1:18), and now that wrath has been propitiated, or turned away. God's wrath has been turned away from those who deserve it to one who did not deserve it.

Paul now anticipates another question: Why did God do this at this time?

3:25b. He did this to demonstrate two aspects of **his justice**—the first here and the second in verse 26. First, in order to avoid a charge of unrighteous mercy (inconsistent justice) arising from the past when sins had gone unpunished, or when sins were punished on a temporary basis. The Old Testament sacrifices were temporary and symbolic, not permanent and eternally effectual (as Heb. 9 points out). But now God has vindicated his mercy, because all the **sins committed beforehand**, temporarily and symbolically atoned for, have now been permanently atoned for—and justice has been served and demonstrated.

3:26. Second, he did it ... to be just and the one who justifies, and in so doing reveals his own righteous character. This is the final answer to the question of God's own justice (righteousness). If he had forgiven sin without a sacrifice, the charge of injustice would be valid. But because a sacrifice was made for sin—and because he himself initiated and provided the sacrifice—he is both **just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus**. The righteousness of God that demanded a payment for sin is demonstrated by his own provision of the payment.

Paul uses diatribe again in verses 27-30 to illustrate why God's justice leaves man totally in his debt, as Francis Schaeffer illustrates:

Our faith has no saving value. Our religious good works, our moral good works, have no saving value because they are not perfect. Our suffering has no saving value. We would have to suffer infinitely, because we have sinned against an infinite God; and we, being finite, cannot suffer infinitely. The only thing in all of God's moral universe that has the power to save is the finished work of Jesus Christ. Our faith merely accepts the gift. And God justifies all those who believe in Jesus (3:26). If all this is true, then verse 27 is certainly an understatement. (Schaeffer, p. 81)¹

¹ Boa, K., & Kruidenier, W. (2000). [Romans](#) (Vol. 6, pp. 102–112). Broadman & Holman Publishers.