

Romans 3:21-31

After completing the antithesis segment of the diatribe, Paul now returns to discussing his thesis: the righteousness of God has been revealed through faith. In chapter 3 Paul introduced questions in response to his discussion about both Jews and Gentiles being under sin and completes the antithesis with the statement that no flesh will be made righteous—the verb justified is the same root as righteousness—through the law. Paul has painted a very drab and depressing picture of religious life. If this is the case, how can one be made righteous?

We know Paul is returning to his thesis because he again states that the righteousness of God has been revealed, although he utilizes a different verb, to manifest. Paul identifies this righteousness as having been witnessed or testified to by the law and the prophets, a combination phrase that normally refers to the totality of the Hebrew Scriptures. He then explains that this righteousness is through faith for those who believe. A look back at 1:16–17 will find identical language. The gospel of God is “to everyone who believes”, it is revealed from faith and it is given testimony in Habakkuk, the passage he quotes. The repetition of language is intended to draw the attentive audience back to Paul’s major line of reasoning.

Righteousness of God

Romans 3:21–26 in the NAS95 edition contains many clauses and two sentences, which is not a bad approximation of Paul's grammar. Paul describes this righteousness of God in a single sentence in Greek. In other words these five verses represent a single fully connected thought of Paul. Anytime we attempt to understand a sentence it is helpful to find the subject. In this case two words actually function as a subject: the first is the word righteousness and the second is found in verse 25, God. In

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other words this sentence is about the activity of God and God's righteousness described through God's activity.

One question asked on occasions is "where is the righteousness of God testified to in the 'law and the prophets'?" Using the English of the NAS95 edition finds the righteousness of God occurs only in Romans and in 2 Corinthians. The phrase 'God's righteousness' only appears in Romans. This helps us understand that Paul is not directly quoting a phrase from the Old Testament, but rather he is communicating a concept that would have been understood to be related. A successful search for the concept identifies only a few references to God's righteousness. The first is found in Deuteronomy 32:4, which says:

*"The Rock! His work is perfect,
For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He.*

A Second is found in Psalm 48.10.

*As is Your name, O God,
So is Your praise to the ends of the earth;
Your right hand is full of righteousness.*

Isaiah 45:21 says "there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Savior".

These three passages do not seem to reflect Paul's declaration that "the law and the prophets" testified to God's righteousness. Perhaps another term is used in the Old Testament that Paul is referring to with the Greek word righteousness. Many scholars would say it is the Hebrew word, *hesed*. This term is normally translated into English as God's lovingkindness or steadfast love. A search for lovingkindness in the NAS95 reveals over 100 references starting in Genesis 24 and going through Jonah 4.

This clarification about Paul's language choice helps us understand the true

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thesis of his letter; Paul is talking about the *hesed* of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 'Righteousness of God' in the letter to the Romans is the same concept, idea, and characteristic as the lovingkindness of God in the Old Testament. In essence, Paul is stating that the lovingkindness of God can be understood and seen apart from the law; it can be understood and seen through faith!

But the righteousness of God is not the only description that Paul wants to illuminate in this passage. Paul refers to God's righteousness three times, in verses 21, 22, and 25, but also refers to God's glory and to God's grace. Paul is talking about who God is and how humans know who this God is. Basically, Paul says that God is known by what God does, a description fully in agreement with his earlier description that humans rejected this knowledge God. Furthermore, Paul wants to reemphasize that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile even though he does not use those two terms in this passage. This lack of distinction is the basis for the very popular 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" which is not a sentence and is not a statement, but is a clause amplifying the phrase prior to it, "for there is no distinction!" God's righteousness has been manifested for everyone who believes, Jew or Gentile, and the manner of its manifestation is faith.

Paul's return to his thesis results in a complex section full of a tremendous amount of detail. When one looks at the passage as a whole, one can get the sense that Paul is trying to explain the idea later made popular in the phrase "Immanuel", God with us. In Paul's mind the activities of God indicate that God is with humans, an arena apart from which there would be no manifestation of his righteousness. In other words, God's righteousness is not an innate characteristic that we ascribe to a far distant deity

figure, but God's righteousness describes how he interacts with humans. Another of those small impressions we gain is that Paul is fully convinced the message he is proclaiming is in full and total coherence with "the law and the prophets." In other words Paul's Scripture, our Old Testament, reveals God's character described in the single word, *hesed*.

Justification

Having indicated that those who believe are 'justified' as a gift by his grace, Paul indicates the means of this 'justification'. The redemption in Jesus is the means by which God demonstrates his grace. The death of Christ demonstrates God's righteousness, God's forgiveness, and God's activity as the One who justifies, i.e. declares righteous. In the thought world Paul is trying to communicate, the death of Jesus is God's means for demonstrating his *hesed*, his commitment to his people. Crucial to this event of manifesting God's righteousness is the term faith. Verse 22 indicates this righteousness is through faith in Jesus Christ and v. 26 says God is the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Current discussion in the scholarly world centers on what might be the better translation of these passages. But before we can truly explain this controversy with the concept "faith Jesus" it would be good to look at the word faith.

Paul uses the word 'faith' in both its noun and verb forms in this passage but the phrase of interest uses faith as a noun. There are many different ways to describe this word in the English language but the best way would be to envision it through the contrast between Paul's thesis and antithesis. In Paul's antithesis God's righteousness is being revealed yet humans do not acknowledge God. If God's righteousness is

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revealed through faith then it would seem that faith could mean simply to acknowledge God. This acknowledgement is not a nod of the head, a tip of the hat, or standing to the side as one passes, rather it is a full recognition of who God is and what God has done. To be specific, 1:19–20 described what God made evident to the world: his invisible attributes, his eternal power, and his divine nature. These are the innate qualities that humans did not honor, or give thanks for, but rather they exchanged this glory for something else. Paul calls this failure to acknowledge God 'sin' in 3:23. By the type of comparison then, faith is the opposite of sin. Therefore, faith must be a human response affirming God's invisible attributes, eternal power, and divine nature. If one affirms these innate qualities, one must also respond in kind to these superlative descriptions. Faith then, is the responsive hearing of humans that acknowledges the claim God is making on his or her life. Faith is not simply mental acknowledgment of the presence of someone or something, in this case the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From a different angle faith is not something we think, rather faith influences and defines how we live.

We have already identified the subject of Paul's sentence, i.e. the one performing the action, is none other than God. We have discussed that the righteousness of God is through faith and looked at what faith entails. The third element in this re-visitation of the thesis introduces something not found in Romans 1:16-17, the name of Jesus Christ. Paul introduces the person of Jesus into this discussion on two occasions. The first in verse 22, uses the literal phrase "through faith Jesus Christ" which has its own series of questions. The second, in verses 24–25, illustrates the redemptive quality of Christ Jesus. We will address the second and then return to the first.

Jesus the Hilasterion

The means of God's redemption, which enables justification that demonstrates God's righteousness, is Jesus. Paul describes Jesus as well as God's activity in Jesus using a term that is frequently translated either propitiation or expiation. This term is the Greek word *hilasterion*. Before we discuss the meaning of the Greek word in the context in which it frequently appears it would do well to describe the two English words since they are theologically weighted. Propitiation is a term that can mean in simple form, 'the active atoning for sin' but carries a connotation distinct from the other term, expiation, which can also mean in simple form 'the active atoning for sin.' So it is the connotations for these two terms that warrant our inspection. The first-term, propitiation, has to do with placating, which means 'to act in such a way as to relieve the anger or agitation of the other party.' In very simplistic phrasing, God is angry and Jesus dies so God won't be angry anymore. On the other hand, expiation has to do with compensation. One party has engaged in an activity that has created in the second party, God, a sense of being wronged. In order for the second party to be at peace with the first party, the first party must engage in an action of recompense. In other words, Jesus dies so that God has no cause to be mad anymore.

These two terms have been discussed for several hundred years from various theological perspectives and clarifying them now would be nearly impossible. Instead, it would serve us well if we look at the Greek word that is translated into one of these terms. This word, *hilasterion*, is the same word used in the Old Testament for the lid that sat upon the ark of the covenant. The use of this term by Paul brings with it, for the Greek speaking Jewish audience, a familiarity of story and of history. Our difficulty is

that this familiarity is not shared by all modern readers. Briefly, one day per year the high priest would enter into the center sanctuary, the holy of holies, and place blood from a sacrificed goat on the *hilasterion*. This activity was part of the cleansing of the sanctuary so that worship could continue and be accepted for the next year. When Paul uses this term, *hilasterion*, he immediately draws his knowing audience into the image of this Day of Atonement event.

Consequently, this description of God's activity in Romans 3:21–26 carries a similar distinction to the description of the Day of Atonement found in Leviticus 16. In other words, Jesus is both the sacrifice and the place where atonement occurs. In the phrase of Charles Talbert, this term can be understood as "a new locus of the divine presence". Talbert can say this because the lid for the ark of the covenant is also known as the mercy seat, that place where God sat in the midst of the people of Israel. This specific activity of God in Jesus demonstrates God's righteousness by making atonement for sins.

Objective or Subjective Genitive

The more complex discussion has to do with the phrase "faith Jesus Christ" (3:22) or "faith Jesus" (3:26). In the introductory remarks I briefly touched upon this complex discussion introducing the two phrases "faith in Christ" and "faith of Christ". These two possible translations of the phrase "faith Jesus" rest upon whether Jesus is the one exercising this faith, that would be faith of Christ, or whether Jesus is the object of others' faith, which would be faith in Christ. As we discussed in the introductory remarks this is a matter of both exegetical and hermeneutical discussion. When one begins to look exegetically at what the text meant then, one finds that either option is a

possibility. When one starts with a hermeneutical perspective, one finds that history has opted towards the latter, that is to say, faith in Christ. There are a few places where Paul has used the same grammatical form prior to 3:22, but the discussion focuses on how he uses that grammatical form at this point in his discussion.

Looking at possible translations, the options are, 1) "the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law through Jesus Christ's faith" or, in the more prominent translation, 2) "the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law through faith in Jesus Christ." One must then ask, how has the righteousness of God been manifested? Is the righteousness of God manifested through something that we do or is it manifested through something that God has done in the person of Jesus? In 3:26 the translations would be, 1) "so that God would be to justifier of the one from Jesus' faith" or 2) "so that God would be the justifier of the one with faith in Jesus." You might get the picture that this discussion has tremendous relevancy, which it does. However, Paul will introduce this phrase in several other places and we will look at it again when he it appears.

Faith

At this point in time, noting the extreme importance of the word "faith" to the discussion it would be good to revisit possible understandings of this word as Paul would be using it. First and foremost at the heart of faith is what we might term intellectual assent. A very common word in English is the noun, belief. For many in the modern era the two are synonymous; faith equals belief. But this is only part of the picture. Secondary to the heart of this word in the ancient world is what we might call trust. Trust is expressed by one's commitment to a certain point of view. Trust is not an

integral part of the English word belief, but it is part of the Greek word for faith, *pistis*. So if we include two parts to this word faith we nearly get the picture, not only do we express belief based on our intellectual understanding but we also express trust based on our commitment. This commitment results in the third part of the tripod, obedience.

In the modern era faith, or should I say belief, has very little to do with obedience. Belief is merely what you think. One may have the belief that the Oakland Raiders are the supreme NFL team, yet never attend the game or by any of the paraphernalia associated with the Oakland Raiders. But one who buys the paraphernalia, attends the game, and discusses with tremendous passion the inner workings of the coaching of this team expresses more than mere belief, although both would make the same statement concerning the Raiders and their supremacy. In the same way, when one understands the Greek word *pistis* encompasses all three elements then the activities of the New Testament world begin to make more sense.

Sin

This section also gives us new understanding into the word "sin." We see in 3:23 that there is no distinction because of sin which everyone has engaged in; God manifests his righteousness to everyone. We see also in 3:25 that God demonstrates his righteousness by passing over these previously committed sins. Redemption has taken place through faith, regardless of whether it is translated faith 'of' Christ or faith 'in' Christ. Because we know Paul is making reference back to the thesis in 1:18 and summarizing the antithesis of 1:19–3:20, it becomes clear that sin is the failure to acknowledge God while faith is acknowledging God, with the meanings that the tripod we just discussed encourages so that belief, trust, and obedience form and demonstrate

that acknowledgment. When one says Jesus is sinless, one could say Jesus continuously exercised faith. This is not to introduce a deep theological argument but to simply indicate that in Paul's thinking the two ideas, sin and faith, are opposites.

If we rehash the thesis momentarily, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed as it says the righteous one shall live by faith," we can now see what Paul wants to talk about. Paul proclaims the revelation of God's righteousness that is fully consistent with the teaching of first century Jewish Scripture; that this righteousness is through faith; that there is no distinction in how this righteousness is revealed; and that God has justified everyone who has sinned by his grace, redeeming them in Jesus, who God has displayed as the Mercy seat in order to demonstrate God's righteousness that he might be righteous and demonstrate righteousness to those who have faith. This statement and description sounds like really good news! God has been doing things to those and for those who have missed out on his glory in order that those who missed out on his glory might understand that God is righteous. The gospel Paul talks about, consequently, is about what God is doing!

Since we know Paul uses the ancient form of diatribe what comes next? He has stated his thesis, introduced and explained his antithesis, and now restated his thesis in new language. The next part is to begin to deal with certain objections to the thesis and then provide an example of his thesis. In the remainder of chapter 3, Paul asks a few questions reminiscent of the questions he asked in 3:5 and 3:9. Paul's first question is "where is boasting?" indicating that boasting should have been part of the answer. In the ancient world one would boast about what one had accomplished. But boasting is

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excluded because Paul is not talking about humans but rather about what God has done. The next question is “what kind of law is this, the law of works?” Paul says there is a law but it is the law of faith. He will have much to say about the word "law" later. Paul then makes absolutely clear that justification is apart from the law. One can almost insert the question, why?, before Paul's next statement. Is God the God only the Jews? Paul replies with a firm “No, he is the God of the Gentiles as well” as well as providing the answer that Jew and Gentile are justified through faith, and there is only one God. This is a brief reminder of how we concluded the introductory remarks by stating the simplistic understanding of Paul, God is one, God is fair, to the Jew and to the Gentile.

Paul's final question, one that he may not finally answer until chapter 6 or 7, is "does faith nullify the law?" And he says no with a capital N and capital O! In fact he says faith establishes the law, that is faith undergirds the law and precedes the law. One can ask how does this happen? Paul is the one presenting the argument right now and he is about to answer that question by providing an example of how this faith establishes the law.

In 3:21–31 we see Paul returning to his thesis with more clarity and precision. We find Paul introducing the main actor of his Gospel, God, as well as the means God uses to establish and communicate his righteousness to both the Jew and to the Gentile, Jesus. We also find the method, faith, that clarifies who understands the righteousness of God. In these 10 verses Paul clearly identifies the center of his proclamation. Unfortunately, many readers of Romans spend far too much time allowing page inches, i.e. 1:19–3:20, to indicate what is important rather than listening and hearing what Paul has to say to his first century audience.