

Sunday, May 8, 2022 | Church Words

Romans 3:21-26 | "Justification and Propitiation"

Last week, we started a new series called "Church Words." Oftentimes, people who have been in church awhile use language that is unfamiliar to new believers and unbelievers (i.e., "gospel," "justification," "propitiation," etc.). And sometimes, even the Christians who use those words don't fully comprehend their significance. In this series, we will use the book of Romans to help us better understand some commonly used "church words" and their application to believers.

And the first church word we defined was "gospel." The Gospel is not only good news that can **save** you; it is also good news that will **keep** you. It is good news to the sinner because it tells them that they can be saved despite their actions. But it is also good news to the saint because it tells them that they are still saved regardless of what's occurring around them.

Today, we'll be looking at two words: "justification" and "propitiation." Sadly, time does not permit me to read from where we left off last week in Romans 1:17. However, it is important to what we'll be learning today for you to understand the general drift of Paul's argument up to this point in Romans 3:21.

Springboarding off of what the gospel is (i.e., "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes..."), Paul explained why the Gospel was needed in the first place. He shows that all were under the penalty of sin because all men have sinned. Regarding the Jews, they broke the Law given to them by God through Moses. Though they were explicitly told what is right and wrong, they could not perfectly uphold the Law, so the Jews were condemned by the Law. Concerning the non-Jewish world, they, too, were guilty though they did not have Moses and the Prophets to guide their thinking. Paul explains that these people, rather than transgress some written law of God, violated the law written in **creation**. Though the evidence was all around them that revealed God's presence, human beings chose (and still choose) to ignore the data plainly written in the sky and on the earth.

All of mankind stands guilty before God and deserving of his wrath and judgment because whether through special revelation (i.e., the Law; cf. Heb. 1:1-2) or through general revelation (i.e., creation; cf. Ps. 19:1-2), man has disobeyed the calling of God. The Jews are guilty because they failed to uphold the law. The non-Jew is guilty because, in denying the existence of God in creation, they are consumed by their lusts which leads them to do deplorable things (i.e., homosexuality, covetousness, murder, boastfulness, etc.).

Admittedly, before Paul got to our passage today, the people reading his letter would've been depressed. They learned that all were guilty, even the Jews. It was not through adhering to the O.T. laws (i.e., no one could become that perfect) nor through being a good person (i.e., no one was born that perfect) that one could be saved from God's wrath. Only through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, are the guilty made righteous. And through that free gift of salvation in the Gospel, Paul explains that two things happen simultaneously at the moment that someone accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior: justification and propitiation.

As I said last week, Romans 1:16-17 are the thesis of the entire book of Romans. Paul told them right up front what he wanted to show them about the Gospel. Here, Romans 3:21-26 is the very heart of the book of Romans. In this passage, Paul does not simply tell you the point of the Gospel; he explains the very mechanism (i.e., how it works) of the Gospel. The question he seeks to answer here is not, "How could God punish humanity?" He made the answer to that question painfully obvious for nearly three whole chapters: we deserve punishment. Instead, the real question he sought to answer for his audience was, "How could God save humanity?" God is holy, after all. His judgment is without blemish. Human beings do not deserve to go to heaven because of the things we've done. Yet, according to the Gospel, that is precisely what happens. If a judge, in our world, sets a criminal free, we would rightly say that judge was unjust. So, does this mean that God is unjust in allowing us to be saved? No. Why? As Romans 3:21-26 explains, because of Jesus.

READ: Romans 3:21-26 (ESV)

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I want you to notice two things about the Gospel:

i. Justification is the judicial decree of God by which humanity's sin is redeemed.

When Paul used the word "redemption" in verse 24, he used terminology from the Exodus narrative. There God delivered the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt through

miraculous events (i.e., ten plagues, parting of the Red Sea, etc.) and a single sacrificial lamb. Through those two things, an entire nation was set free. The Jews did not revolt. They did not rebel. They did not subvert the Egyptian government in order to convince the powers that be that they were too much trouble and so they should set them free. No. The Jews did nothing. God did everything. Thus, their status as slaves was redeemed by a judicial decree of God. And in being justified from the enslavement to Egypt, they were reconciled to God. **More on "reconciliation" next week.**

In the same way, being set free from the bondage of sin and death does not come about by human will and work. It is a gift from God. Just as the Jews would've been powerless to set themselves free from Egyptian enslavement, we, too, are powerless to free ourselves from our sinful enslavement.

ii. Propitiation is the **sacrificial act** of Christ by which God's **wrath** is **appeased**.

When Paul used the word "propitiation" in verse 25, he used terminology from the Temple (cf. Heb. 2:17; 9:5). Often referred to as the "mercy seat," the propitiation was the place on the Ark of the Covenant where the Priest would sprinkle the blood of the pascal lamb and thereby atone for the sins of Israel (cf. Ex. 25:17; Lev. 16:14-15). This is similar, though not identical, to other sacrificial systems. To "appease" the god's wrath, a sacrifice was needed to pay for any transgressions.

But this practice reaches back even further in Israel's history to a scene with Abraham in Gen. 22. In that passage, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. This, we are told, was to test Abraham's resolve, presumably because he had failed when he went outside of God's will and sired a son with his wife's concubine. The reason follows that because Abraham sinned, there would need to be a sacrifice. Now, to us, this seems extreme. But, to Abraham, God's command for him to sacrifice his son wasn't too strange. After all, God had promised that Abraham would be given an inheritance through Isaac. And because God cannot lie, Abraham hypothesized that the Lord would have to raise Isaac from the dead after the sacrifice for his own promise to come true.

However, things don't go as Abraham had thought.

READ: Genesis 22:9-14 (ESV)

⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham,

Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Though a sacrifice was needed for Abraham's sin to be amended, and even though Isaac should've been the sacrifice, God provided another gift, one who took the place of Isaac. In the same way, another has taken our place. Where we should've been slain on the altar, Jesus Christ was killed on the cross as a propitiation to satisfy God's wrath (cf. Mat. 26:39). But (and here's the kicker), unlike how God allowed Abraham's son to be set free, the Lord did not spare his own son when he paid for our sins (cf. Jn. 3:16; Rom. 8:32; 1 Jn. 4:10). Notice Paul's phrasing in verse 25, "**whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.**" God and no one else is the one who "put forward" Jesus Christ, his Son, to be the propitiation of our sins.

Propitiation is the means by which God satisfied his own wrath through the offering up of his own son. And this is why God, as Paul put it, is both "**just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**" Without Jesus, God saving humanity would've been an unjust act in the same way that a judge who lets a convicted criminal walk free would be unjust. Regardless of age, birth, upbringing, circumstances, or mental capacity, all of humanity is deserving of punishment. We are, all of us, sinners. But because of Jesus, God not only satisfies the requirements of his own righteous and just character, but he also shows mercy to anyone who puts their faith in Jesus Christ. Suddenly, a person who was the focus of God's wrath becomes the focus of God's forgiveness. And to be forgiven is to be reconciled to God. **But, more on reconciliation next week.**

So, what's the takeaway?

The **unjust** are made **just** by God's **proclamation** because Christ **paid** for our sins on the Cross.

Or, as Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, "we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Gal. 2:16). You can do nothing to earn salvation or pay for the sins of the past because everything that could be done has been done in Jesus Christ.

Video Description

Church Words | Week 2 | "Justification and Propitiation"

TEXT: Romans 3:21-26

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: