

## Just and the Justifier --- Romans 3:23-28

November 5, 2017

### Introduction

*Romans 3:23-28 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. 27Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

The last part of verses 25-26 addresses an obvious question based on all that Paul has conveyed up to this point. The question is this, "If man is as utterly evil as Paul has depicted him, and the only hope of being made right with God is through Jesus, then what about all the people before Jesus? How were they made right with God? What about people in the Old Testament?"

A society for the spread of atheism distributed a pamphlet that asks a similar question, "How could God just overlook the sin of Old Testament people?" These atheists made a tract that contains six portrait sketches of old men, and they wrote under each sketch the name of a well-known Old Testament character, like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and others. The sketches are ugly and even look like "wanted" posters for outlaws. Below each portrait, there are a few lines relating to the lives of these men.

For example, under the face that is supposed to represent Abraham, it said that he was a coward who was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife, Sarah, in order to save his own skin. Sarah might have actually been ravaged by another man so that Abraham could be safe. The atheists provided Bible references that support these accusations. They show that the Bible says that Abraham was called "the friend of God." The profile concludes by asking, "What kind of God is the God of the Bible who would embrace a man like Abraham in all of his sin?"

There is a second portrait, supposedly of Jacob, and they describe him as a man who was a cheater, deceiver, and a liar. Again, Bible verses are given to support their accusation of Jacob. They go on to say that Jacob wrestled with God, after which God changed Jacob's name to Israel, which means "Prince of God." The atheists question the character of a God who would have such a prince over His people or who would allow Himself to be called "the God of Jacob."

Actually, their questions are fair questions. If it can be shown that God embraced such men as these without bringing their sin to judgment, then the character of God would be tarnished. What would we think of an earthly judge who handed down a heavy sentence on one lawbreaker and then, seemingly for no good reason, let a similar criminal go free so that the freed criminal could be the judge's assistant? We would say that justice was diverted. A judge's responsibility is to recognize crime and the breaking of the law and then give the right and fitting punishment.

The atheists provided a third portrait which was of Moses, with Bible references to show that he was a murderer and a fugitive from justice. YHWH, the One True God, appeared to him and sent him back to Egypt as His own representative, calling him His servant and setting him up as a leader of His people. The atheists accuse the God of the Bible of putting into the hands of this murderer the very Ten Commandments that contain the law, "Thou shalt not murder." Their conclusion is that God is a hypocrite. What kind of God would use a murderer to proclaim, "Thou shalt not murder"? According to the atheists, instead of blessing Moses, God should have punished him.

Lastly, the atheists put forth David. David is particularly repulsive in the drawing. They list passages that tell of his adultery and of the murder he committed in order to cover up his adultery. They claim that David had STD. Then they point to verses that say that David was "a man after God's own heart." They accuse God, saying, "What kind of God is the God of the Bible who could praise David or say anything good about him?"

As I said, there is a sense in which these atheists raise fair questions. God acknowledges the objections Himself in our text this morning by saying that He publicly displayed Christ Jesus *"as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate [God's] righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."*

What this atheistic pamphlet is asking is this, "How can God be just if He simply embraces these men in all of their sin?"

They wrongly accuse God of being unrighteous because God just overlooked their sin. But they did not understand that, in fact, God did address their sin both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. These atheists inadvertently asked the question that Paul is answering in our text this morning; namely, "How were God's people in the Old Testament made right with God during a time before Christ's death for sin?" This morning, I want to consider how Paul answers that question.

## Review

Last week we focused on the meaning of the term "propitiation." We saw that propitiation has everything to do with satisfying the just wrath of God. It involves the shedding of blood. Hebrews 9:22 *And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.*

We saw that there are examples in Scripture that show both how destructive our sin is and how great the grace of God is when we consider the subject of "blood" in the Bible. For example, God was the first to take a life in all of history when He killed innocent animals to clothe Adam and Eve. Blood had to be shed because of sin. As you follow the theme of blood in the Bible, the grandpa figure of our tame, only-loving God is shattered. We find a holy and just God who sheds blood as a just response to sin.

Revelation 14:19-20 *So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God [this speaks of the judgment of mankind during the Tribulation]. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of two hundred miles.*

This is a picture of rebellious mankind being thrown into the winepress of God's wrath. Blood shed is the result of man's sin and God's righteous wrath. *"Without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness."*

We saw that it is vitally important to keep in mind, while considering "propitiation," that God's wrath is closely associated with His justice. God's

anger is not subjective, vacillating, or arbitrary like man's wrath can be. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he refers to "wrath" ten times. But in each instance the word he uses is ὀργή, and his point is that God is not suddenly flailing out in petty anger against something that has offended Him momentarily. The word ὀργή portrays wrath as something that builds up over a long period of time, like water collecting behind a dam. Paul refers to God's firm and dreadful hatred that is building up against all wickedness and will one day result in eternal judgment of all who reject God, truth, and Christ.

*Romans 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.*

*Romans 2:6, 8-9 [God] WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS; . . . but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek.*

*Romans 5:9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.*

We saw that when we talk about satisfying, or propitiating, God's wrath, we must include in that discussion the role of shedding blood. "Blood" is a word pointing to the violent death inflicted in the animal sacrifices in the Old Covenant. Leviticus 17:11 *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement."* Here Moses is giving instruction concerning offerings for sin. The animal that was to be offered for sin was first symbolically established as a representative by the sinner laying his hand on its head and so identifying himself with the sacrifice; and then it was killed as a substitute. The blood was sprinkled before the Lord as a sign of turning away wrath and restoring fellowship.

Following are a few New Testament verses that speak of the necessity of blood ---

1 Peter 1:2 refers to believers as being sprinkled with the blood of Christ. *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the foreknowledge of God*

*the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.*

*Ephesians 1:7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.*

*Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Packer writes, "The wrath of God is as personal and as potent, as His Love. Just as the blood shedding of the Lord Jesus was the direct manifesting of His Father's love towards us, so it was the direct averting of His Father's wrath against us."

So the doctrine of propitiation involves the shedding of blood to satisfy the wrath of God, which flows out of His justice. The doctrine of propitiation helps explain how God "passed over" sin in the Old Testament until the crucifixion of Christ.

### Just and the Justifier

That brings us to the question that was asked earlier, "How were God's people in the Old Testament made right with God when Christ had not yet died?" If sinners are justified through Christ, then how were Old Testament saints made right with God, since Christ had not been crucified? There is a three-fold answer to this question. I want to break it down into three parts: 1) God's Righteous Forbearance; 2) God's Covering of Sin; and 3) God is Just and the Justifier.

In a nutshell, we learn from our passage that salvation has always been accomplished by faith. The Old Testament saints as well as the New Testament believers, which include us, are all saved through the same means; namely, by God's grace through faith.

The Old Testament saint, when he sinned, took a sacrifice to the temple, laid his hands on the innocent sacrifice, and the sacrifice was killed instead of the sinner. The sinner did not know all that was involved in God covering his sin through the sacrifice. The sinner had to accept God's way by faith and trust in God. The sinner did understand grace, though. He understood

that God had graciously accepted a substitute in his place. So the Old Testament saint was made right with God by grace through trusting in what God told him to do.

We too are saved by grace through faith. God tells us that we must acknowledge that we are sinners, unable to save ourselves. We must place our whole trust in the person of Jesus Christ and what He accomplished on the cross and through His resurrection. When we do so, we are reconciled or made right with God in this life and in eternal life after we die.

So we consider Paul's explanation concerning how people were made right with God before Christ.

### God's Righteous Forbearance

[speaking of Christ, it says],

*whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

*This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God*

*He passed over the sins previously committed.*

Romans 3:25

The atheists say that God is not righteous if He forgives sinners without punishing their sin. Well, God would agree. The Bible says that God will by no means allow the guilty to go without judgment. God will not just clear the guilty. Every sin that has ever been committed must be judged by God. These atheists thought that Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David (along with others) deserved to be separated from God forever. It is true that it appears that God had simply embraced these men without judging their sin. We see hints of that in Paul's terminology, "forbearance of God" and "He passed over their sin."

It is also true that all of these men deserve to be eternally separated from God. So do I and so do you. But instead we find that these men are in the presence of God Himself even now. We know that truth because Moses and Elijah, both men from the Old Testament, appeared and spoke with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration during Jesus' earthly ministry. How could this be possible?

The answer to that begins with understanding God's forbearance. We must understand that, at the point of man's rebellion against God, God does not owe mankind anything. I have told you before that if God had taken Adam

and Eve after the fall and immediately cast them into the lake of fire, He would have been just, and they would have received their full consequences.

More than that, if God had waited and allowed Adam and Eve to populate the earth for thousands of years and then brushed all of mankind into eternal judgment, the holy angels in heaven would have glorified God, singing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. The earth is full of Your glory." In fact, God did judge most of mankind via a worldwide flood but was gracious to eight people: Noah and his family. But we must know and understand that God owes absolutely nothing to man.

Instead of judging man instantly, God has continually poured out blessing and grace upon mankind as a whole. This is the forbearance of God. I am not even referring to the supreme act of mercy in His giving His only Son, but rather I am simply focusing on God's goodness to unsaved mankind. For example, let's say that you are not a believer in the Gospel and yet you are still alive and not in hell. That is God's forbearance. Instead of hell, you are on earth in good health and alive and eating well and clothed and enjoying shelter. That is the grace of God; that is His forbearance.

You come home from your job and your child greets you; or your parent comes home from work and gives you a hug. That is God's grace. You go into your house and enjoy all the luxuries of modern living. You turn on your air conditioner or fire up your heater in the winter; you have running water; you sleep in a comfortable bed. That is God's forbearance. So even though we have no excuse for our sin against God and we are all guilty before Him, yet He, in His forbearance, gives grace.

God's forbearance enables man to live in peace, to gain wealth, and to live in health. All that is the result of the riches of God's kindness, His tolerance, forbearance, patience, and long-suffering. In Greek these words are generally used of a holding back, a delaying.

*2 Peter 3:8-10 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be*

*destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.*

So God in His forbearance passed over sin previously committed in the Old Testament. That does not mean that He winked at sin and did nothing about it. God still judged sin even in the Old Testament. The question is: How did He judge sin?

### God's Covering of Sin

*because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed*  
Romans 3:25c

We learn that the sins of God's people in the Old Testament were “covered” at the time when they committed them. Their sins were not utterly removed, but they were covered. The Hebrew word for “atonement” is “kippur” which means “to cover.” You may have heard of “Yom Kippur,” the Day of Atonement, the day of covering.

The Day of Atonement in the Old Testament was a yearly reminder that the daily, weekly, and monthly sacrifices made at the altar were not sufficient to remove sin. Even at the altar, the worshipper stood “far off,” unable to approach the holy presence of God. God's presence was represented in the Holy of Holies. One day a year, on Yom Kippur, the covering blood was brought into the holy of holies by the high priest as the representative of the people.

But the shed blood of sacrifices could only cover the sin of God's people in the Old Testament. It could not provide eternal justification. It was not until Jesus came in the flesh and offered Himself as a sacrifice that God's wrath could be satisfied.

*Hebrews 10:1-4 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins. 3But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* The sacrifices could not take away sin, but they could cover sin until a later time.

Hebrews 9:11-12,15 *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. . . . 15For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

There on the cross, God took the sins previously committed by God's people in the Old Testament and our sin and placed them upon Jesus, and poured out His wrath upon Him. By doing so, God showed for all of time that He is just and righteous and without compromise. The atheist's problem is that they stopped at the Old Testament and missed the whole point of the New Testament. So when Jesus died, the sins which had been covered in the Old Testament were uncovered, placed upon Jesus, as John the Baptist called Him, the Lamb of God, and Jesus satisfied the wrath of God.

God always had in mind the death of Christ for the sins of all the world for all of time. We find in the Scriptures that Christ's death was not a knee-jerk response by God to fix man's sin. God had planned the death of Christ beforehand. God announced in the Old Testament that He would provide His Messiah who would die for sin.

Isaiah 53:5-6,10 *But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. 6All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. . . .10But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.*

Peter's first sermon in Acts 2:23 states that Jesus was “*delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.*”

So God was gracious and forbearing as He dealt with His people in the Old Testament. God provided a covering of sin through the shed blood of innocent animals until the time of Christ, the eternal Lamb of God, the

innocent Son of God who shed His blood to satisfy the justice of God and the wrath of God. As a result, . . .

### God is Just and the Justifier

*For the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Romans 3:26

*“So that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

We spent a whole Sunday considering an overview of what the Bible teaches about justification. In a nutshell, justification is not a forgiveness which just overlooks wrongdoing and fails to bring sin to justice. No, justification is an act of justice. When God justifies sinners, He is not simply declaring bad people to be good or saying that they are not sinners after all. He is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any guilt or liability for breaking the law because God Himself has borne the penalty of their lawbreaking. We are justified by His blood. God is just in pronouncing both those in the Old Testament as righteous by faith and those in the New Testament even up to today.

So when it comes to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David, God did not simply overlook their sin. He removed their sin as He does your sin and mine; namely, through the propitiation which is in Christ, and through the redemption and justification which is in Christ by grace through faith. It is all of God through the person of Christ.

### Conclusion

I want to conclude with this thought. If we can do nothing to make ourselves right with God, and He is the One who has provided all the means to be reconciled to Him, can you or I take credit for any of it? Paul asks that question in the next verses. Romans 3:27-28 *Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

Because salvation is all of God's doing, we cannot take any credit for any of

it. Boasting flows right out of pride, and pride is the headwaters of all sin. Christianity assaults your pride. Being justified before God is not a result of your being a good person. Paul has made clear that you are far from being good. You are a downright evil person. Furthermore, because being made right before God is through faith and even faith is a gift from God, then the Gospel furthermore assaults your pride in that your trust in God is not something you can boast about. Ephesians 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Think for a moment of some of the grounds of which we boast or for which we try to take credit; for example, morality. Most people think that they can save themselves by being moral or doing good things. They believe that they are more moral than other people and, therefore, God approves of them.

Apart from God, we all draw up our own little system of morality, and then we live by our own sets of laws and rules and then expect God to approve of us based on our efforts and achievements. "God, I am not like others who are immoral drunkards, sexually promiscuous. I don't lie. I am a hard worker. I go to church and give." And the list goes on. Salvation through the work of Christ undercuts all of that. Christianity assaults your pride.

Other grounds for boasting today include one's feelings. Here is what I mean. There is a decline in morality today that has crept into the church. So for some people, their focus is not on morality, but their feelings. Their thoughts go something like this: "I have such warm thoughts about God whenever I come to church. I know that I am not a very moral person, but my heart is so tender. I feel close to God. At times, tears even come to my eyes. Surely God must approve of such a sensitive person as me."

This kind of thinking is not new. In every generation, there have been people pushing a kind of charismatic agenda that focuses on mystical feelings and emotions. Even back in Spurgeon's day, this type of emphasis was prevalent. He wrote this about religious feelings, "Souls, souls, this is works in its most damnable shape. Works says, 'I will rely upon what I do.' But if you rely upon what you feel, you shall as certainly know eternal judgment as if you trust in what you do." Spurgeon went on to discuss the difference between remorseful feelings and repentance. One can feel sorry for sin, but repentance is an action word. Repentance takes steps to turn

from sin.

So we cannot pride ourselves in our morality or our feelings. Furthermore, we cannot take pride in our knowledge. Some people think that they are going to be saved by their superior religious knowledge, and they take pride in that. They may not be really moral or even “feeling” oriented, but they know a great deal of doctrine and have a very sound theological system.

I have run into this type of people in discernment ministries who will slice and dice just about everybody out there besides themselves. You will find this mindset in seminaries. Some think, “How could God possibly condemn me when I understand the doctrine of the Trinity so well, or salvation, or election, or end times, or creationism?” And the list goes on. First Corinthians 8:1 says that knowledge makes arrogant or puffs up.

No one will be saved by mere knowledge. Saving faith includes knowing the truth, but knowledge is not faith. The devil understands more doctrine than any man, but he is going to know eternal judgment.

When the day is done, the bottom line is this: There will not be one word in heaven from anyone claiming to have had anything to do with his or her salvation--not even a word. We begin to see here that salvation is from God and God alone. Everything associated with salvation is from God. Boasting is excluded.

If you are here this morning and have not been made right with God, then know this. If you confess that you cannot be good enough to be made right with God, and you turn away from the world and your sinful self, and simply trust in what Christ has done for you, then you will pass out of judgment and be reconciled to God. There are only two places in this universe that your sin can be. Your sin is either on Christ or it is on you. If your sin is on you, then you must bear the eternal weight of God's justice. If you roll your sin over onto Christ by trusting in the Gospel, then Christ's payment for sin is credited to your account. You no longer bear your guilt.

You may have been a real jerk like Abraham; or you may have been a cheater and liar and deceiver like Jacob; or you may have been a murderer like Moses; or you may have been as vile as King David, who committed adultery and then murdered to try to cover it up. It matters not. You can

become like them a “friend of God,” “a man after God's own heart,” “a child of God.”

God calls you to confess and agree with His description of you that we have studied in the first three chapters, namely that you are totally depraved, that you are not righteous even in the least, and that you cannot make yourself right with God. If you agree with our text this morning:  
*Romans 3:23-25 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*