

Justification

Romans 3:21-28 + from the series, "A Summer in Rome"

Message from the Master Broadcast July 6, 2008 by Pastor Daron Lindemann

The book of Romans has been called Paul's *magnum opus* and "the gospel according to Paul." Because of its majesty Martin Luther wrote, "This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes."

Romans was not the first of Paul's epistles, but is placed at the beginning of the epistles because it lays a foundation upon which other epistles are built. Paul did not write Romans to address specific problems in the church, either, but to build up the believers there in their knowledge and faith, with the expectation that this mixed group of Jews and Gentiles would work together in harmony and establish a home base of Christianity in this most influential city.

The blessings of this book of Romans span the centuries to make a difference in our lives today. Just as the city of Rome is a destination worth visiting, the book of Romans is a book worth reviewing. So, this summer in our Message from the Master series we will be spending "A Summer in Rome." Our tour through the book of Romans will offer highlights of the Spirit's work through Paul, beginning today with what some consider the most significant portion of the entire book of Romans in chapter 3, a section that defines the core of our Christian belief: **Justification**. To help relate the various components of justification I will be your tour guide today and comment on each phrase of this section, as if taking you step by step through the sights and sounds of a vacation destination.

Paul begins, "*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.*" Righteousness is the state of being right, like two friends being good with each other after an argument or a bunch of numbers added up to the proper amount that is "just right." Are you "just right" spiritually? Is your soul in good shape? Are all the spiritual blessings you could ever want yours anytime you need them? Is your faith strong? Are your sins forgiven? If the answer to these questions depended on your ability to make them happen, you'd have to think twice. Justification, however, assures us that the answer to all those questions is, "Yes!" Why? Because of where your righteousness comes from. Your righteousness according to Romans comes "*from God.*" God is the source of your being spiritually just right, which means your spiritually "rightness" has no flaws, cannot fail, and will never fizzle when you need it most. This is "*apart from law,*" totally separate from any obedience to God's will demanded by God's law. So, the Bible is saying that people are spiritually "just right" because of God does, not because of what we do or don't do. That means we don't belong to different levels of being right with God, like a deluxe membership or a platinum record or a third place righteousness. No, when God is the source of you being spiritually right, you and I are the same "just right" with God as everyone else whose righteousness comes from God. And we don't have to guess about that, ever, because it "*has been made known.*" Different than the mysticism of New Age religion, our God doesn't hide his treasures behind secret code or bury them deep within a confusing mind games of personal introspection. Our God delights in revealing his blessings to us plainly in his promises written in the Bible. The primary purpose of the Bible, then is this,

“that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

While it is true, then, that objective justification teaches us that God has saved the world, it is also true that the entire world will not be saved. *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16)* are words we readily recall about this very difference between objective justification and subjective justification. One is God’s declarative promise that Jesus is *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29)*, and the other is the personal appropriation of that promise individually as Romans explains, *“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”* The United States government can print economic stimulus checks, assemble them, and deliver them to its citizens at no cost to us. If you get the check and don’t cash it, it’s only a worthless piece of paper that doesn’t benefit you in the least. God sent his Son Jesus Christ for everybody in the world. If a person doesn’t put the payment that Jesus won on the cross in the bank of his or her heart, that payment is worthless to that individual.

We might be tempted to thank that some people, because of their skin color, tax bracket, home value, educational background, or denominational heritage are more predisposed to these blessings of God than others, but Romans assures us that is not the case. *“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* This statement of Scripture bursts the inflated ego while at the same time it builds up the despairing conscience. As a sinner I am no different in God’s eyes than any other sinner. I fall short of God’s glory as much as Mother Theresa fell short of God’s glory as much as our synod president falls short of God’s glory as much as the drunken driver who killed a mother and her unborn baby as much as corporate embezzlers as much as deranged pedophiles as much as corrupt politicians. Psalm 14 levels the playing field when it reminds us, *“There is no one who does good ... All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (vv. 1,3).* Think of the best of the Bible: Abraham, Moses, King David, Simon Peter, the apostle Paul. None of them obeyed God perfectly enough to not need his forgiveness, and none of us has either. So it’s not that some need to be justified but others, because of their good works, don’t need to be justified. All have sinned. All fall short of God’s expectations, in one way or another, to one degree or another. What is true of all humankind in regard to sin, however, is also true in regard to God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. All are *“justified freely by his grace.”* Grace is a love of choice extended to one who does not deserve it. None of us deserve God’s love, but he freely offers it to all of us. Not because of us, but because of him. *“His grace,”* Romans assures us. Here again we have the assuring reminder that our salvation does not begin with us or depend on us or complete itself in us but in God. So we have no worries about promises becoming true. No worries about a place in heaven. No worries about a sin that might not be able to be forgiven. Because we live by *“his grace.”* The specific acts of that grace are many, but the most significant is the *“redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”* To redeem is to buy back, like a hostage negotiator might provide a helicopter and bank transfers to a kidnapper in exchange for a kidnapped person. God made an exchange that freed us when he paid his own Son’s life blood to release us from bondage to sin, death, and the devil. Here we find another solid reassurance that builds up our faith! Being just right with God is not a possibility, but a reality. A historical reality based on a real event in this real world at a real time. Jesus was born, lived, died, and rose again to save us. Nothing can change that. Nothing!

“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood,” Romans continues. It wasn’t the greedy Judas or the self-righteous Sanhedrin or the politically savvy Pontius Pilate who put Jesus to death. It wasn’t even us! The Father’s hands were on the hammer that drove the spikes through the hands and feet of his Son. *“God presented him.”* It was the divine plan by a loving God who’s desire for sinners to be right with him would not rest until it accomplished the mission of atonement, of satisfaction for sins. That satisfaction was found in the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from all our sins. Believe in that blood for your forgiveness!

Romans calls this *“justice.”* Today the various cops and criminals TV shows depict justice in every episode when the responsibility for crime is exacted by the end of the show. Justice is met when the crime is paid for. So God is *“just”* when he makes sure that our sins are paid for. His justice is met not in our personal ability to pay for our sins, because we can’t, but in the payment offered by Jesus Christ for us. So God *“justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”* Even those believers of the Old Testament who sinned and died before Jesus came found justification in Jesus, the Lamb of God, who took the punishment for their sins instead of them. In the same way, we New Testament believers do not receive punishment for our sins even though Jesus died long ago, because that punishment was placed on him in an objective way for all people of all time.

When something is just right we like it, and we might want others to know it. They might notice green lawn and colorful flower beds, or well behaved grandchildren, or plaque hanging on the wall and we like it when they think well of us for our accomplishment. That’s not sinful unless we depend on such accolades for our security and love. So the Bible asks that question, and answers it, as it relates to our justification: *“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.”*

If any of us were so good that we earned the most precious spiritual benefits that belong to us now, we’d have a right to boast, because we would have kept the law. But our justification is a gift that is freely given by grace and received by faith. Since that is the case, and we cannot design or build our own salvation, we have no right to boast and truly have no need to boast.

A trip to Rome this summer could cost you at least hundreds, and more likely thousands of dollars. You’d get a lot of out of it to be sure, but you’d have to pay for it. As we begin *A Summer in Rome* studying this gem of God’s Word, we will get a lot out of it to be sure. But the best part of what we enjoy here in Romans is that we don’t pay for it. It is entirely a gift to us by God’s grace that we receive through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more right than that. Amen.