

*“Welcome One Another
Just as Christ Has Welcomed You”*

A Study of Romans for the
Diocese of West Texas, Fall 2009

Study and Reflection Session 2:
“God’s Justice Revealed in the Faithfulness of Jesus”
(Romans 3:21-31)

The Passage: New Revised Standard Version Translation

Romans 3:21 But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. 27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28 For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. 31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Romans 3:21-31 is recognized as one of the most difficult passages to translate in all of Paul's letters! But once you've worked through the translation, you will understand more clearly the complex reasoning that Paul is using. Pay attention to the fact that this familiar passage falls within a discussion concerning how all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, fall short of the glory of God. Paul is "leveling the playing field" between these two groups among the Roman house churches, so that neither can claim to be superior in God's sight.

Romans 3:21 "But now, apart from Torah, the justice of God has been manifested, and is attested by the Torah and the Prophets, 22 a justice of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ [*pistis Christou*] for all who are similarly faithful [*pisteuō*]."

When Paul speaks of the "law" (Grk. nomos), he is referring to the Jewish Torah. Christians have become accustomed to opposing "law" and "faith," but when we do so, we seem to suggest that God has thrown out any kind of standards of behavior ("law"), in favor of some kind of mental assent to God ("faith"), whereas nothing could be further from the truth. What Paul is truly contrasting is the Torah (a distinctly Jewish path of life) and a way of faithfulness open to all people, which Jesus embodied, and that we are gathered up into when we live a life "in Christ" (see Gal 3:27).

We have discussed the important family of Greek words that begin with pist- in Session One. Let's add some more to what we know. The Greek word-group pist- was closely linked with the arts of rhetoric, or public persuasion. The rhetorical goal of a public speaker was to persuade his or her hearers of something. The one who is persuaded by ever-mounting evidence of various types develops confidence in what the speaker is advocating. This confidence (or faith, trust, or belief) is "pistis." When you are confident that something is true, you necessarily act upon that confidence. The Greek language does not

distinguish between faith and faithfulness, between having confidence and acting in accordance with that confidence. Both use the verb pisteuō. Our English distinction between having faith and acting faithfully is not conveyed through the Greek verb pisteuō, though many translators import the distinction into their reading. The sentence above highlights the key to Paul's use of this family of words: that there is a parallel established between the pistis of Jesus and the pistis of his followers. For Paul, to be a believer was inextricably bound up in our modeling a faithfulness to God like that of Jesus, as well as a confidence in God like that of Jesus, in our own contexts. For this reason, we have added the word "similarly" to the last line above.

For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24 they are now justified freely[(dōrea, literally "as a gift")] by his power for new life [charis],

If you ask your average Christian what "grace" is (the Greek word, charis), he or she will usually say something like, "It's a free gift from God." But you can see above that Paul has another word for gift, dōrea. When he talks about God's grace, he is usually referring to a particular gift from God, namely the gift of the power of God working through us to bring newness of life, not for us only, but for all who are around us. God justifies us, or brings us into right relationship with God and our neighbor, in order to empower us for faithful living. This empowerment by God can truly change the world, in all the places where we live and work.

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God displayed as a mercy seat in his [Christ's] blood for a show of his [God's] justice, because in God's forbearance he passed over the sins previously committed, 26 in order to make a display of his justice in the present time.

Paul has three metaphors at work in the lines above. The overarching one that has been guiding the discussion since Chapter One comes from the court of law, and concerns God's justice. When we think about the social context of Romans, and the likely disputes between Jews and Gentiles that lie behind the letter, we can imagine that perhaps the Jewish members of the Christian community at Rome felt that full inclusion of Gentiles – without requiring that they conform to Torah – was letting them off too easily, and making a mockery of God's justice embodied in Torah. Paul has been at pains to prove that God has been gracious (empowering) to both Jews and Gentiles, without regard for the previous sins of either group.

The second metaphor is that of "redemption." Jesus' unwavering obedience to God, all the way through death, has "bought us back" from the powers of Sin and Death (see chapter 6 of Romans, for a background on Paul's understanding of Sin and Death as destructive powers at work in the world). Redemption is connected with the theme of Christ as a "ransom" (see Mark 10:45). In Johnson, pp.38-39, you will find a good discussion of the contexts in which "buying back" occurred in the first century.

The third metaphor, the "mercy seat," is the most difficult for us to relate to, as the context in which it made sense no longer exists. The mercy seat (in Greek, the hilastērion) was located in the innermost chamber of the Jewish Temple, entered only once a year by the High Priest, on Yom Kippur, to make sacrificial atonement for the Temple itself as a part of the atonement of the whole Jewish people for any unintentional sins they may have committed in the previous year. According to Leviticus, God was gracious to the Jewish people by abiding with them through the liturgies of the Temple, even though they were continually guilty of "uncleanness" (living unworthily of God). Atonement (at-one-ment with God) was accomplished by the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrificed goat on the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:15-16). The fact that we have become accustomed to regarding the death of Jesus as a sacrifice is evidence of how removed we are from the context in which Paul was writing. All of Paul's communities were well aware that Jesus was crucified by Roman authorities as a political criminal. What Paul dares to say here is that what the Roman world called a justified execution, God pointed to as an acceptable

sacrifice of atonement, because it was the obedient faithfulness of God's anointed one (Grk. Christos) that brought him to his death. What Rome intended as punishment, God chose to receive as atonement. The proof of this is in God's raising of Christ and the ongoing power of Christ's life in the churches.

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what Torah? By that of works? No, but by the Torah of faithfulness [*pistis*]. 28 For we account a person justified by faithfulness apart from works of Torah.

Perhaps the best way to understand what Paul means here by "boasting" is to see how he uses the word in the rest of this particular letter. In chapters two and four, he speaks negatively of the boasting that Jews might do, on account of their unique relationship to God, because they are the community that holds the Torah:

NRSV Romans 2:17 **But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the Torah and boast of your relation to God** 18 and know his will and discern what is best because you are instructed in the law, 19 and if you are confident that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the Torah the embodiment of knowledge and truth, 21 you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 **You that boast in the Torah**, do you dishonor God by breaking the Torah? 24 For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

NRSV Romans 4:1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2 **For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.** 3 For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed (*pisteuō*, "put all his confidence in") God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Then in Chapter 5, Paul speaks ironically of what a believer in Christ might boast in: suffering in the present, and the hope of glory in the future:

NRSV Romans 5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; **and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.** 3 And not only that, but **we also boast in our sufferings**, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

According to Paul, boasting over being Jewish by birth is inappropriate, since one's ethnic identity as a Jew (Grk. kata sarka) does not really guarantee a life of the kind of radical faithfulness that Paul is encouraging for his people. God, who has received the death of the faithful one, Jesus Christ, as an atoning sacrifice for all people (Jew and Gentile alike), has abolished the dividing line that the Torah set up. The pattern of faithfulness established by Jesus gathers all people into one saving pattern of living.

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is God not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised by faithfulness and the uncircumcised through the same faithfulness. 31 Do we then annul the Torah by this faithfulness? By no means! On the contrary, we confirm the Torah.

The pattern of faithfulness established by Jesus, the pattern of absolute trust in God's ways, come what may, is deeply consistent with Torah. The difference Paul is stressing in Romans is that this way of faithfulness is open to all people. The one God of all will bring all people into right relationship with one another and with God, through a single standard of faithfulness, the standard established by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. See Philippians 2:5-11 for a thumbnail sketch of Paul's understanding of the pattern of Jesus' faithful

obedience. In those verses, the One who had all power relinquished it to take the form of a slave, and for that reason was raised by God to glory .The question for each of us is, then, How do we live the standard of Jesus in our own time and place? What does it look like in my family? at my place of work? in my neighborhood? in my congregation? in my diocese or even in the wider church? Whoever is in the most powerful position is the one called to be in service to others.

Questions for Reflection

1. Paul saw his world as divided between Jews and Gentiles. What main divisions do you see in our world? Do you see anyone (and this might include you!) boasting unnecessarily of a special relationship with God? What would Paul say to that?
2. How would you describe the standard of behavior that Jesus embodied? Can you tell a story about a time in the last week when you saw someone embody the faithfulness of Jesus? Was there suffering involved? Can you point to specific scriptures that describe Jesus doing something analogous to what you witnessed? How did you observe others being enriched by the faithfulness of the person you have described?