



How Can God Be Righteous and Justify Sinners?

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This week, I wanted to linger a bit in the precious reality that Pastor Danny presented to us last week, which was for many, perhaps, the first time they might have heard that **God is God-centered**.

Another way to say that is that God ultimately does everything that he does for His own glory, His own fame, His own pleasure, His own delight.

Yet another way to say that is that God loves Himself more than He loves anyone or anything that exists, or is yet to exist, or is real or is not real.

And yet another way to say this is that God loves himself more than He loves us at Haverhill Community Church.

Danny took the time last week to observe God's God-centeredness in 3 areas and texts: 1) Creation from Genesis 1 and Isaiah 43:7, 2) Exile from Genesis 3:23-24, and 3) Redemption from Ephesians 5:25-32.

I wonder how each of you received that.

I personally think that this concept is the most beautifully illuminating and eye-opening truth that I have ever heard.

It has entirely changed my orientation in the way I understand life and the Bible.

And it is no small matter for us here at Haverhill Community Church.

As our shepherd Danny has been recasting our vision in this new season, this distinctive is forging our new direction.

We need to appreciate that most Christians in America today do not believe such a truth.

We also need to appreciate that most Christians and non-Christians in the Haverhill area do not believe such a truth.

Therefore, I do not want to want to take for granted the timing of this opportunity to teach you.

Instead, I would like to peer into a very important biblical text that undergirds and further supports Danny's subject last week on the God-centeredness of God.

So, turn in your Bibles with me to Romans 3, as we will be looking at verses 19-26. (You can also read from the screen above me).

19. But we know that what the law says, it says to those under the law, so that every mouth might be silenced and the whole world might be brought to trial before God. 20. Therefore, by the works of law no one will be justified before Him, because through law is the knowledge of sin. 21. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and Prophets, 22. the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, for there is no distinction 23. because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, 24. being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, 25. whom God offered as a mercy-seat sacrifice through faith in his blood as proof of His righteousness because of the overlooking of sins which were previously committed 26. in the patience of God till the proof of His righteousness in the present time in order that he might be just and the justifier of the one having faith in Jesus

Now, Romans is by far the densest of Paul's letters, and entering his argument at that point is like entering a river in its most violent rapids.

So I will try to be a good and careful guide here by focusing our attention on a clear path.

As we dive in, let's just note a bit of the context of our passage.

- **So far in Romans, Paul has been making the case that God is angry with humanity.** He is angry with humanity because they do not glorify Him or worship Him, but ignore Him and defy Him on every level. And when I say angry, I mean infinite wrath angry. Here's a sampling:

Romans 1:18-25 ¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

As that last verse points out, humanity has exchanged **God-centeredness** for **creature-centeredness**.

- **No one will be declared righteous as obedient law-keepers at the judgment before God because nobody keeps the law.** Rather, the law of God is the standard by which



we are declared guilty in God's eyes. Since we are hopeless law-breakers, then law-keeping can never be the basis of our justification or declaration of innocence before God.

Romans 3:19-20 ¹⁹ But we know that what the law says, it says to those under the law, so that every mouth might be silenced and the whole world might be brought to trial before God. ²⁰ Therefore, by the works of law no one will be justified before Him, because through law is the knowledge of sin.

These notes of context lead us to Paul's staggering assertion in our passage.

See in verse 21, "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been revealed being witnessed by the Law and Prophets".

That is to say, in this epoch or age or leg of redemptive history that God has revealed or unveiled a basis for our justification before Him that does not depend on our law-keeping.

And just in case the reader is tempted to think that this concept is new he adds, "being witnessed by the Law and Prophets", which his way of referring what we call the Old Testament. So this revelation of God's righteousness was anticipated in the Old Testament.

So what is this basis of God declaring sinners righteous? He tells us in verses 22-24,

22. the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, for there is no distinction 23. because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, 24. being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus

God declares sinners righteous on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ as a gift through the redemption Jesus accomplished.

This is what is meant by "Justification by Faith".

There is no nation or ethnicity or gender or age that lays exclusive claim to God's declaration of righteousness because every last one of us has sinned and is guilty before God. Indeed, from our birth, we are centered on the creature and not our creator.

Now, if it is just or righteous for God to condemn every one of us for our sin, **how can he declare us righteous by faith in Jesus and still be just?** This question is at the pulse of Paul's argument.

The answer lies in Paul's amplification or defining of the "redemption which is in Christ Jesus" from verse 24. Of Jesus, he says in verses 25-26,

25. whom God offered as a mercy-seat sacrifice through faith in his blood as proof of His righteousness because of the overlooking of sins which were previously committed 26. in the patience of God till the proof of His

righteousness in the present time in order that he might be just and the justifier of the one having faith in Jesus

God offered up Jesus Christ, His Son, the very embodiment of God, the incarnate God, as a sacrifice to Himself.

The crucifixion of Jesus served as a “mercy-seat” sacrifice.

Why did I translate it “mercy-seat” sacrifice? Most translations have “propitiation”, “atoning sacrifice”, “or sacrifice of atonement”.

Well, this word is a word which is used dozens of times to translate the phrase “mercy seat” in the Old Testament.

Just in case you may have forgotten, the “Mercy Seat” is part of the Ark of the Covenant which was located in the Holy of Holies in the temple.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest of Israel was permitted to go into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice on behalf of Israel and he would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the Mercy Seat. It is located underneath the angels on the cover of the Ark.





Paul is saying that the death of Jesus on a Roman cross nearly 2000 years ago is where God poured out His wrath as atonement for the sins of all who believe in Jesus.

Before this Christ-event, there was no sign or proof of God's wrath against sinners.

God had been patient and overlooked every sin previously committed.

The death of Jesus is proof that God is violently angry with sinners and that He is a righteous judge and punisher.

The sacrifice of Jesus is the basis upon which God justifies sinners and declares them righteous and innocent.

Therefore, this underscores the unique beauty and being of Jesus.

Only this holy one, this sinless one, this God-man can be a suitable sacrifice.

As we know from Hebrews 10:4, "For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins"; and Paul tells us later in Romans that an ordinary man's condemnation is only effective or suitable for one ordinary man.

God killed his Son to demonstrate, to prove that God is both righteous and can justify the ungodly.

Therefore, the death of Jesus, which justifies us who believe in his blood, is unswervingly God-centered.

Luke gives us a similar window into Paul's thought in his account of Paul at Mars Hill in Athens in Acts:

Acts 17:24-31 ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." ²⁹ Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."