

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Exegetical Paper on Romans 3:21-26

Submitted to Dr. Steve Waechter, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the completion of the course

Fall 2013 NGRK 505-D03 LUO

Greek Language Tools

by

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December 13, 2013

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## Introduction

The essentials of the faith are summed up in Romans 3:21-26 in powerful fashion. C.E.B Cranfield notes that it is “the center and heart of the whole of Romans 1:16-15:13.”<sup>1</sup> Luther once referred to this passage as “the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.”<sup>2</sup> In the space of a handful of verses, Paul will explain how man is given hope in that God has provided a righteousness requiring nothing more than faith to be received. At the same time, it becomes quickly apparent to the Biblical student that lying under the surface of these verses is a great depth of meaning and far more to study, ponder and debate than can be contained in this simple paper. Ultimately, the themes of righteousness, justification, sanctification, and propitiation become critical discussion points and defining them, as well as their use in these verses become vital.

## Context

Written by the Apostle Paul, the epistle to the Romans is a significant piece in the New Testament in discussing doctrine. While Paul did not start the Roman church, and as of the writing of this epistle, had not been there, he wanted to build connections with the church there as well as provide apostolic instruction. He wrote it towards the end of his third missionary journey, most likely around AD 58.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Cranfield, C.E.B., *The International Critical Commentary: Romans: Volume 1: Introduction and Commentary on Romans I-VIII*, (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark LTD, 1975), 199.

2 Moo, Douglas J, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 218.

3 MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Romans 1-8*, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1991), xviii.

The context of Romans 3:21-26 within the epistle itself is significant. After traditional greetings, Paul launches into the discussion with his thesis statement, Romans 1:17 in the NASB, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’” Having laid the ground work that salvation is through faith, Paul begins the process of making his case in Romans 1:18-3:20 where he focuses on man’s sinfulness regardless of whether or not they are Jew or Gentile, the impossibility of being saved through the Law, and God’s faithfulness.

### **Analysis of Text**

MacArthur breaks the passage down into seven elements of righteousness that God imparts to those who place faith in His Son<sup>4</sup>:

1. Righteousness is Apart from Legalism (v. 21a)
2. Righteousness is Built on Revelation (v. 21b)
3. Righteousness is Acquired by Faith (v. 22a)
4. Righteousness is Provided for All (v. 22b-23)
5. Righteousness is Given Freely Through Grace (v. 24a)
6. Righteousness is Accomplished by Redemption (v. 24b)
7. Righteousness was Paid by Atoning Sacrifice (v. 25a)

#### Righteousness is Apart from Legalism

*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, (Rom. 3:21a)*

ὡνι δε, while on the one hand is a simple phrase translating to “But now” in this passage, on the other hand represents a powerful transition. Paul’s preceding passages have been building up to this moment in the text, having laid out the utter impossibility of man ever finding a way to God through the Law or any other method, with those two simple words signifies that he is now

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 201.

giving the incredible answer to man's horrific dilemma. Cranfield writes that it represents "a contrast between the impossibility of justification by works, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the *fact* that in the recent past a decisive event has taken place, by which a justification which is God's free gift *πεφανερωται*, and is now *πεφανερωμενη*. It is not unfair to claim that this *vvvi* points to the decisiveness for faith of the gospel events in their objectiveness as events which took place at a particular time in the past and are quite independent of, and distinct from, the response of men to them."<sup>5</sup>

The word Law, translated from *νομου*, is in reference to the Mosaic covenant, or Old Testament law. Translators chose to capitalize it as a way to show the intent of the Greek to reflect that it is not some passing reference to local legal codes, but rather, a direct reference to the system of law revealed to be a temporary system to guide the Jewish people under God.<sup>6</sup>

Righteousness, *δικαιοσυνη*, is a key word throughout the passage and is used four times by Paul in these five verses. The righteousness of God describes a state of being that is acceptable to God, as well as communicating the idea of an attribute of God, and an activity of God.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, this opening portion of the passage is clearly stating a separation from the traditions and expectations of the past, that the Law they had once placed their trust in and labored under is no longer the way to righteousness. It is in fact manifesting in believers

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<sup>5</sup> Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 223.

<sup>7</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 70-72.

completely separate from the Law, and Paul will continue to explain the various aspects of righteousness to the readers.

### Righteousness is Built on Revelation

*being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, (Rom. 3:21b)*

The phrase translated “Law and the Prophets” is νομου και των προφητων. It is one that the Jewish audience would have immediately recognized as referring to the Pentateuch (books of Moses) and “everything else” (the rest of the Old Testament).<sup>8</sup> In other words, Paul is telling them that while this new activity takes place outside of the Law they have known, the entirety of the Old Testament, something they have been spending their lives studying, points to and predicts this new work of God. Consequently, through its anticipation of it, the Old Testament has witnessed God’s righteousness being manifested.

Warren Wiersbe explains it this way: “The Law bore witness to this Gospel righteousness even though it could not provide it. Beginning at Genesis 3:15, and continuing through the entire Old Testament, witness is given to salvation by faith in Christ. The Old Testament sacrifices, the prophecies, the types, and the great ‘Gospel Scriptures’ (such as Isa. 53) all bore witness to this truth. The Law could witness to God’s righteousness, but it could not provide it for sinful man. Only Jesus could do that.”<sup>9</sup>

For Paul, the reality of the Old Testament connecting to, and playing a role in communicating this, is critically important in his communication to the Jewish audience. We see

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<sup>8</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 223.

<sup>9</sup> Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Volume 1*, (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1989), 523.

this in his stressing of this point here, and it plays a significant role in his transitioning from the reality of human futility and the promise of righteousness through faith.<sup>10</sup>

### Righteousness is Acquired by Faith

*even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; (Rom. 22a)*

Repetition is a tool for emphasis throughout the Bible. Paul is driving home the point that the righteousness of God is manifested in believers through faith in Jesus Christ. Some have made the argument that πιστεως ησου χριστου would be more accurately translated “faith of Jesus Christ,” primarily based on a couple of reasons. The first being that πιστεως is usually translated “faith of” instead of “faith in.” The second reason being that they feel it would more accurately fit the flow of the passage which is attributing salvation completely to God – scholars who lean towards a “faith of” translation find it jarring to have an action of man inserted in the middle of a statement focusing on the action of God.<sup>11</sup>

However, Paul writes repeatedly throughout Romans and Galatians about the faith of believers in Christ.<sup>12</sup> For Paul, a believer’s faith in Christ is a constant and repeated theme, making it far more likely this is his intended meaning in this passage. In addition, Paul does not speak elsewhere of the “faith of Christ,” making it unlikely this would be his one mention of it. Ultimately, the faith of believers in Christ makes the most sense for this passage and the themes

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<sup>10</sup> Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary*, 203.

<sup>11</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R., *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 184-185.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 1:5, 8, 12; 3:27, 28, 30, 31; 4:5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20; 5:1, 2; 9:30, 32; 10:6, 8, 17; 11:20; 14:23; 16:26; Galatians 2:20; 3:2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 26; 5:5, 6.

in Romans, as Paul is driving home the point that salvation is not through works, not through the Law, or any other method other than through faith in Christ.

MacArthur writes about this Christ's righteousness and the believer's faith in Him; "Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of God's righteousness, and it is because of that truth that He can impart divine righteousness to those who trust in Him. During His earthly incarnation, Jesus demonstrated God's righteousness by living a sinless life. In His death Christ also demonstrated God's righteousness by paying the penalty for the unrighteous lives of every human being."<sup>13</sup>

#### Righteousness is Provided for All

*for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Rom. 22b-23)*

Paul is driving home the point that just as the Law was unable to save anyone, regardless of race or heritage, there is no limit to who can be granted righteousness as long as they believe. His point is that sin removes any kind of perceived status one person may feel they have over another; it places everyone equally outside of God's righteousness.

MacArthur explains it this way, "Just as everyone apart from Christ is equally sinful and rejected by God, everyone who is in Christ is equally righteous and accepted by Him."<sup>14</sup>

The word translated "fall short" is *υστερουνται*, which literally means "to be behind, to be later, i.e. (by implication) to be inferior; generally, to fall short (be deficient)."<sup>15</sup> One of the common understandings of it was in regards to a race; to fall behind, to fail to reach the goal or

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<sup>13</sup> MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 206.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>15</sup> <http://lovewins.us/bible/strongs/G5302>

the end of the race. In other words, Paul is saying that everyone fails to reach the goal of God's glory. Moo also explains that because of the present tense of the word, it communicates the idea that Paul feels everyone is continuing to fall short of God's glory.<sup>16</sup> While believers are being sanctified – becoming more like Christ – they are not there yet, and while God views them as righteous through Christ's death and resurrection, they have not fully arrived until they are with God in eternity.

### Righteousness is Given Freely Through Grace

*being justified as a gift by His grace (Rom. 24a)*

δικαιουμενοι, translated “being justified” in this passage, literally means to set right, or render righteous. It is a legal term, and in Paul's usage it conveys a legal reality in that those who are justified and made righteous have been acquitted by God from all charges that could have been brought against them for judgment.<sup>17</sup>

The tense of δικαιουμενοι means that it is modifying a word or phrase, apparently expanding on verse 22 which speaks of the righteousness of God being given to those who believe. Because they believe, they are therefore justified, or acquitted by God from their sin and made righteous. Paul is using language the earlier believers would have clearly understood, with the legal metaphor making clear God's role and their role in salvation. While some scholars feel that verse 24 is beginning a new thought, Cranfield argues that it actually indicates the scope of verse 22.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>18</sup> Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary*, 204.

Paul is again emphasizing that salvation is not based on works or following the Law as he makes the point in this portion of the passage that this justification, acquittal, transmission of righteousness is a gift based on God's grace. Moo claims that grace is one of Paul's most significant terms, writing: "He [Paul] uses it typically not to describe a quality of God but the way in which God has acted in Christ: unconstrained by anything beyond his own will. God's justifying verdict is totally unmerited. People have done, and can do, nothing to earn it. This belief is a 'theological axiom' for Paul and is the basis for his conviction that justification can never be attained through works, or the law, but only through faith."<sup>19</sup>

#### Righteousness is Accomplished by Redemption

*through the redemption which is Christ Jesus; (Rom. 24b)*

ἀπολυτρώσεως, redemption, means at its core "liberation through payment of a price."<sup>20</sup> Around the time of the writing of Romans, this word often was used in reference to the ransoming of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals. It is a powerful word picture. Chrysostom interprets it with a definitive nature of Christian redemption resulting in believers never falling under the previous slavery again – in other words, he sees it as another piece of evidence for the validity of eternal security.<sup>21</sup>

MacArthur speaks of the utter depravity of man resulting in such an impossible scenario that the only possible way to bring man up to God's righteousness is in the form of a sinless

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<sup>19</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 228.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 229.

Savior paying the price to redeem sinful man.<sup>22</sup> The idea of slaves and condemned criminals is an accurate portrayal of the futility of the state of man without God – making the concept of righteousness being gifted freely to sinners comparable to the lowest members of society at the time that much more incredible to consider.

### Righteousness was Paid by Atoning Sacrifice

*whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (Rom. 25a)*

Propitiation is translated from the word *ἱλαστήριον*, literally meaning an atoning victim.<sup>23</sup> It carries the basic idea of appeasement, or satisfaction.<sup>24</sup> During that time, the idea of man appeasing a god through gifts or sacrifices was common; the key difference with Christianity was the reality that instead of man attempting to appease a god, it is God satisfying His own justice and passing on the righteousness to man.

This concept would not be a new one even to the Jewish Christians. The Hebrew equivalent to *ἱλαστήριον* used in the Old Testament was in reference to the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies. The high priest would go in to it once a year on the Day of Atonement to make a sacrifice on behalf of the Jewish people. He would sprinkle blood on the Mercy Seat symbolizing the payment of the penalty for his sins and the sins of the nation; the key word is symbolizing as the act itself did not appease God's justice, it merely looked forward to the day when Christ's death would accomplish it. For the Jewish listener, hearing the Greek version of the Mercy Seat would bring immediate understanding of what Paul was speaking to, that he was once again

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<sup>22</sup> MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 209.

<sup>23</sup> <http://lovewins.us/bible/strongs/G2435>

<sup>24</sup> MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 209.

emphasizing that the price of salvation is paid by God through Christ, not through any kind of work or effort from man.

Moo writes, “Christ, Paul implies, now has the place that the ‘mercy seat’ had in the Old Covenant: the center and focal point of God’s provision of atonement for his people.”<sup>25</sup>

While the passage has been split into seven pieces helping to illustrate the different aspects of righteousness brought out in this passage, the rest of verses 25 and 26 really serve to drive home this finally point regarding propitiation. Cranfield writes, “Paul is saying in these two verses that God purposed (from eternity) that Christ should be *ἱλαστήριον*, in order that the reality of God’s righteousness, that is, of His goodness and mercy, which would be called in question by His passing over sins committed up to the time of that decisive act, might be established.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Application**

Biblical scholars are right in claiming this passage represents a foundational message from the scriptures. The Old Testament lays the groundwork, Christ arrives, lives, dies, rises again, fulfilling the prophecies and revealing the great mystery. Human nature loves a checklist, a series of tasks that must be performed in exchange for salvation, but Paul sums up the message of salvation in the space of a handful of verses and makes it crystal clear that restoration with God does not come through work, completing a checklist, or any other method of human origin –

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<sup>25</sup> Moo, *New International Commentary*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary*, 212.

it is a gift from God, God is the one creating and giving the righteousness, there is nothing mankind can do other than place their faith in Christ.

While packed with theological and doctrinal weight, the application of this passage is simple: man must place his faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection to receive the gift of salvation. Placing faith in the Law, works, or any other belief system is a futile endeavor. This is as true today as it was two thousand years ago when originally written.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the challenge for the believer is to recognize the natural human tendency to desire a to-do list, a works system of merit based salvation, and in recognizing that acknowledge that weakness to God and ask for the strength to simply place faith in Christ's death and resurrection to receive the eternal security of God's righteousness. While there are incredible amounts of resources and debates focused on these verses, sorting out every possible detail and angle, the core truth - that everyone is equally sinful and fallen, hopeless with the power of God with the only requirement being belief – is one that is easy to remember and apply to one's life. Righteousness is attainable, and it will impact every aspect of the believer's life.

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## APPENDIX A: BLOCK DIAGRAM

Romans 3:21-26 (NASB)

- 21 But now  
 / apart from the Law  
*the* righteousness of God has been manifested,  
 being witnessed by  
 the Law and  
 the Prophets,
- 22 even *the* righteousness of God through faith  
 in Jesus Christ for  
 all those who believe; for  
 there is no distinction;
- 23 for all have sinned and  
 fall 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 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;
- 26 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.