

The Righteousness of God

[Proposition: At the heart of the Gospel is the death of Christ which shows us the righteousness of God, therefore we must receive him as our justifier or face him as our judge.]

Introduction

Let me begin with a question, “What would you say is the ‘heart’ of the Gospel?” “Heart” in the sense of the center, the very essence of the Gospel. What is the heart?

Whether you are a Christian or not you should be able to answer that question. If you are a Christian, so that your thinking, feeling, and doing are aligned with God’s revelation in the Gospel. But also if you’re not a Christian there is a message here for you too if you will hear it— If nothing else, as you weigh the claims of Christ, don’t rest your judgment on a false impression or a misunderstanding, wrestle with the Bible’s answer, “What is the heart of the Gospel?”

The paragraph we have before us today is recognized by many as the most important in Paul’s letter to the Romans, perhaps the whole Bible,¹ and it gives us the answer to just that question. The answer is found particularly in verse 25-26, Christ was “a propitiation by his blood,” that displayed God’s righteousness as the “just” and “justifier.” **At the heart of the Gospel is the substitutionary death of Christ which shows us the judging and saving righteousness of God, therefore we must receive him as our justifier or face him as our judge.**

I. The Death of Jesus Shows Us God’s Judging Righteousness, he is Just

To understand what Paul means by God’s righteousness showing that he is “just” we have to go back to the beginning of Romans and notice what Paul says about God’s wrath.

A. When the Bible talks about God’s wrath, it means his righteous anger and indignation at human sin.

1. The word translated “wrath” means anger or indignation.

When speaking of God, it describes his righteous anger at sin. This is how, back in chapter 1:18, Paul begins his explanation of the Gospel:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* 2nd ed. in Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 187. Dr. Michael Kruger, President of RTS Charlotte “The Most Important Passage in the Whole of Scripture” available at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/blogs/michael-j-kruger/the-most-important-passage-in-the-whole-of-scripture.html>, likewise John Piper, “The Most Important Paragraph in the Bible” available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-most-important-paragraph-in-the-bible>.

God's wrath is revealed "*against* all ungodliness and unrighteousness," it is his anger at sin: all that denies him, and all that is wicked.

Paul goes on to say that all manner of sin, from murder to slander, evil to envy, and everything in between stands condemned under God's righteous decree² and in Romans 2:5 that every human being, whether Jew or Gentile:

...because of [their] hard and impenitent heart[s] are storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

God's wrath is against sin, and his wrath will be fully displayed in the coming righteous judgment of God.

2. The Natural Law written on human heart cries out for justice and hates evil.

You may find the notion of a wrathful God distasteful, but in fact though we are ourselves fallen and sinful, there remains in us a reflection of his anger toward sin. When we see the abuse of children, human trafficking, mass shooters, and all the wickedness in the world, we don't for a moment shy away from wrath.

We do not extend cheap forgiveness to offenders and ignore the terrible injustice, destruction, and sorrow they have inflicted. Rather love and justice demand that we stand in opposition to evil.

Last Tuesday was the 74th anniversary of the death of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was imprisoned and killed in the concentration camp at Flossenburg for his role in the Confessing Church and resistance to the Nazi party. He famously said:

Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless.
Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

If we imperfect creatures seek justice and vehemently abhor evil, then imagine the righteous God—perfectly upright, just, holy, and altogether good—engaging rebellious people like us. We destroy his good creation, dehumanize his image bearers, and we reject him and set ourselves up as the gods of our little lives. What is the right response to that type of evil?

But, in important ways

B. God's wrath is not like human anger.

The idea of God's wrath is sometimes hard for us because of our experiences of imperfect human anger. But God's wrath toward sin isn't like human anger, and it isn't driven by imperfect human motivations.

² Romans 1:18-31: 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

1. God's wrath is not impulsive or unpredictable.

He doesn't fly off the handle. He is not like that person who you have to tiptoe around because you're never quite sure what will set them off. In fact, Paul says in 3:25 God is the opposite of impulsive, he is patient and in his forbearance has been passing over sins.

2. God's wrath is an expression of Holy-Love.

God is love (1 John 4:8), in whom there is no darkness (1 John 1:5). The essence of the Trinity is holy love—perfect love for God and perfect love for neighbor. When Holy-Love meets unrighteousness (failure to love neighbor) and ungodliness (failure to love God), there is wrath. In fact he does not “become” wrathful, for God never changes.

Rather, God's Holy-Love is like fire. When fire comes into contact with wood the fire doesn't become something it wasn't. The fire remains fire, and it is the wood that burns.

Theologian T.F. Torrance writes

Wrath means that God asserts himself against us as holy and loving creator in the midst of our sin and perversity and alienation. God's wrath is God's judgment of sin, but it is a judgment in which God asserts that he is the God of the sinner and that the sinner is God's creature.... God's very wrath tells us that we are children of God. It is the rejection of evil, of our evil by the very love that God himself eternally is.³

3. Love in the Face of Evil Demands Wrath

There is a billboard over on I4 that says in all caps “GOD IS NOT ANGRY,” that seems to imply that love and anger are opposed. Miroslav Volf writes:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 displaced. My villages and cities were destroyed. My people shelled day in and day out, some them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry.... How did God react to the carnage? By dotting on the perpetrators in a grandparently fashion? By refusing to condemn the bloodbath but instead affirming the perpetrators basic goodness? **Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't**

³ "Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 249-50 in Thomas H. McCall. *Forsaken: The Trinity and the Cross, and Why It Matters* (Kindle Locations 777-785). Kindle Edition.

wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love. ⁴

C. The Death of Jesus vindicates God's righteousness.

Now we can understand what Paul means when he says in that v.25 Christ's death was:

to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

God delays full outpouring of his wrath, his kindness is to lead us to repentance, but in our sin we begin to think God will not judge after all. Paul says, God upheld his righteousness through Jesus's death. God proved he was just (v. 26) by pouring out his wrath for our sin on Christ. Here we see just how serious the wrath of God against ungodliness and unrighteousness is—it required the death of God's own Son to absorb and satisfy it and make a way for sinners to be saved. In this way, **The Death of Jesus Shows Us the (Judging) Righteousness of God, he is just.**

Now that we see the sobering truth of God's wrath toward our sin, we can begin to rightly understand what Paul means when he says in v. 25 that Jesus was a "propitiation by his blood."

II. The Death of Jesus Shows Us the (Saving) Righteousness of God, he is justifier.

The death of Christ is not only proof of his righteousness in the sense that God is just, it is proof too that he is the justifier—he makes a way for sinners like you and me to be forgiven and put in the right before him. First,

A. The Death of Jesus on the Cross Removes our Sin

As we saw last week, there is a hard truth in the message of the Gospel—namely v. 23 "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But God has put forward Christ as answer to our plight. There are multiple different aspects of Christ's work, and the first mentioned here is the removal of our sin.

The word "propitiation" is often translated in the Greek version of the OT as "mercy seat." It was the lid of the ark of the covenant where on the Day of Atonement the blood of the bull was sprinkled to atone for the sins of Israel. Just as animals were substituted for the sins of Israel, so Jesus becomes a substitute for us.

Now, if none of that means anything to you, just know this -- Paul is drawing on images from the sacrifices of the OT, and he is saying if you believe in Christ, your sins are removed, because he dies in your place.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiveness in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 138-139. Cited in Michael Reeves, *Delighting In the Trinity*, (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 119.

B. The Death of Jesus on the Cross Removes (or turns away) God's wrath from us.

But as we have seen, the removal of sin is not the only, or even the most prominent note being played. Our plight is both sin and wrath—and that is what Jesus's death is for us: the removal of not only sin, but of God's wrath.

We could trace the way the word translated “propitiation” is most often used in the OT, namely in contexts that have to do with God's wrath—but the context of Romans 1-3 we noted above is sufficient. As Leon Morris writes in his book *Atonement*:

... unless [this word] hilasterion means ‘propitiation’, Paul has put men under the wrath of God and left them there.⁵

For three chapters Paul has turned up the volume on the wrath of God, and now he says in v. 25:

whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

God: Father, Son, & Spirit are angry at our sin. We have each personally rejected this God of Holy-Love, but he put forward Christ to shelter us from his wrath. Jesus on the cross became a wrath averting sacrifice for all those who place their faith in him for their salvation.

Because Jesus is fully human and fully divine—his divinity kept his human nature from sinking under the wrath of God, and because he is the one person Jesus, mysteriously the Second Person of the Trinity, God's Son experienced death to remove wrath from me.

Just as the Noah's ark sheltered Noah's family and the animals from the flood of judgment, so Christ shelters those who are “in him” by faith from God's wrath against sin.

Illustration:

In *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Vol. 1 there is a scene where the ship the guardians are on is falling from the sky and soon will crash and kill everyone on board. But Groot, the sentient tree creature, seeing their predicament extends his arms, and his vines and branches grow to surround the guardians to protect them from the impending doom. Having not said anything other than “I am Groot” the whole movie, at this moment he says “We Are Groot.” The guardians are one in Groot, and he shelters them.

That is a picture of the reality Paul calls “propitiation”—by faith we are in him by his loving sacrifice he shelters us from the wrath of God we deserve.

C. The Saving Righteousness of God comes to us through faith

This salvation comes to us through faith alone, as Paul says in v. 22, 25, and finally v. 26 God is the:

...justifier of the one who has faith Jesus.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*, (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 169.

To speak of God as “justifier” means that for those who have faith in Jesus, in the place of wrath and sin, God gives us the perfect righteousness of Jesus. Look at v. 22

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

His perfect record is credited to your account by faith. Your sin is removed, God’s wrath has turned away, and you stand in the right with him not based on yourself but on the record of Jesus Christ.

1. Unity

This truth is a powerful reality that undercuts any notion of any superiority of one group of people over another. Whether Jew or Gentile, Rich or Poor, Black or White, Young or Old, or any other distinction we have all sinned and we are all justified in Christ through faith. We don’t boast in our record of morality and neither do we boast in what makes our group great—we boast in Christ’s perfect righteousness.

2. Life in Community based on the fact that we are all sinners saved by grace.

The righteousness of Christ is also the only firm ground for Christian community. To paraphrase Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, the deepest thing Christians have in common is that they are sinners justified by faith. The more we build community on that truth and not just affinities or even friendships—the more we will experience true community as the body of Christ.

D. The Saving Righteousness of God comes to us as a gift

Paul says all this salvation comes to us from God as a gift. Verse 24-5

24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

God offers us all of this as a gift of grace, as a gift. It was God who “put forward Christ” to take your place on the cross to remove sin and wrath, and give you perfect righteousness before him. Gifts are not earned or deserved, they can only be humbly and joyfully received.

Illustration:

The great preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards is today perhaps most famous, or infamous, for his sermon “Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God.” When he delivered this sermon, it is said that men and women were groaning under the conviction of their sins and fainting in the anxiety of their unrighteousness. Frankly, that is probably the right response when we square up and face the wrath of God. He writes:

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given, and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose.

'Tis true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are continually rising and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward; **if God should only withdraw his hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.**⁶ (Works 22, 410–11)

You could not endure it, the devil were he 10,000 times stronger could not endure it, but Jesus Christ has endured it—for you. And he bids you to come in faith and follow him.

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Works vol. 22*, 410-411, cited in Owen Strachen, *The Essential Jonathan Edwards: An Introduction to the Life and Teaching of America's Greatest Theologian* (pp. 387-388). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.