

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Appearance of God's Righteousness

by Dan Trygg

"But now apart from Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the prophets."

Romans 3:21

Paul returns now to a theme he had mentioned way back in the first chapter. He had spoken of the gospel as being "the power of God for salvation to everyone who trusts in it" (vs. 16). **The Good News brings God's ability to save people. It is the effective way He has provided.** He then said, "for in it [i.e., the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed". He went on to speak of how God's wrath was against humankind, because we have *suppressed the truth*, instead of choosing to *live by it*. Whether people had been openly taught about God, or not, **everyone had enough knowledge about Him, and about what was right and wrong, to be responsible and accountable for what they knew.** Furthermore, *everyone had suppressed the truth that they knew*, in some fashion or another. *All were guilty.* All had ignored what was the *right* thing to do, at some point, in favor of doing what they *wanted* to do at the time. Everyone was under the influence of sin. No one could be absolutely righteous before God on the basis of their track record. *When it came time to stand before God, we would have nothing to say to defend or justify ourselves.* We would be left with nothing to say. Our mouths would be stopped (3:19,20).

As we follow Paul's argument, he tells us that **now, apart from the Law, or any self-righteousness, God's righteousness has been manifested, or made visible.** The OT Law and Prophets *had spoken of it*, and now *it has finally come.* **What? The righteousness of God, which comes by faith in Jesus Christ to all who trust in Him.**

Who needs it? We all do! There is no distinction between those who know virtually nothing about God, versus the so-called "moral people", or even the religious people. **Everyone has sinned.** They have "missed-the-mark". They have all made mistakes. They may have been well-meaning, at least at times, but they all screwed up. **The bottom line is that they lack the glory of God.** I realize that most Bibles translate Rom. 3:23 as "for all have sinned and *fall short of* the glory of God...", but that rendering does not really capture the true meaning of the original language. The underlying Greek word is *hustereō*, which usually means "to be in want or need of, to lack; to be inferior to, or less than". It occurs sixteen times in the NT (Matt. 19:20; Mk. 10:21; Lk. 15:14; 22:35; Jn. 2:3; Rom. 3:23; 1 Cor. 1:7; 8:8; 12:24; 2 Cor. 11:5, 9; 12:11; Phil. 4:12; Heb. 4:1; 11:37; 12:15), and in most of those examples the word is translated as "lack" or "be in need of". **The difference in the translation is very significant. If we understand that we simply "fall short of" the glory of God, that means that we have not performed or attained to the level of purity, righteousness or perfection that would be characteristic of God.** That is no surprise. It is an observation regarding the universal performance of all people, but it makes no suggestion as to what is the underlying cause of our dilemma. If, however, we were to translate *hustereō* as it normally is translated, then we have a clearer perception of the nature of our problem. **If Paul is saying that we are lacking or in need of the glory (or radiance) of God, then he is pointing at the core issue behind our poor performance. We have a basic need. Our need is that we do not have enough of the glory of God.** This may be somewhat difficult to grasp, because most of those we know are in the same condition. **Jesus was the only person who did not have this lack or need. He was full of God's glory, and radiated it out from His inner being** (Jn. 1:14; Heb. 1:3). It is clear that this is in Paul's mind for us, because he comes back to it later as an important aspect of what God wishes to do for us through Jesus Christ (5:2; 8:29,30; cf. Col 1:25-29).

Paul is preoccupied here with "justice", or "righteousness". In the twelve verses from 3:20-31, he uses some form of this root word some ten times! Five times it is used to describe **God's righteousness** (vss. 21,22,25,26 [twice]). He is absolutely just. Everything He does is completely fair and equitable. He never cheats, nor does He compromise His standard of absolute, pristine justice. This is important for us to understand. **There is no "slop" with God. He doesn't just "let people off the hook".** All that He does is done in righteousness and integrity. He doesn't simply "look the other way" when people sin. **Every sin, every wrong, each and every injustice must be addressed by Divine justice. If they were not, then He would not be just.** If He let something go by, then someone could find fault with Him, if He didn't also overlook someone *else's* sin. **The only way for Him to be above reproach is if He were to be absolutely consistent.** *Every sin* must have consequences. *Every wrongdoing* must be punished. *Every injustice* must be made right. Of course, **if He were not completely fair and just with everyone, then He would not be truly good, either. Justice and goodness stand or fall together.**

Having established that truth, **the Good News is that this just and holy God has established a way for us sinners to be "justified" or "righteous-i-fied", without any compromise on His part.** This is what the other five usages

of forms of the root word for “righteousness” or “justice” describe in this passage. **Five times Paul talks about us being “justified”** (vss. 20,24,26,28,30). **What does this term mean?** There are *two ideas* wrapped up in this term.

First, is the notion, coming from the law court, that a person is “justified” when he is *acquitted from charges levied against him*. Legally, he is *declared “righteous”, or innocent*. If I were *acquitted*, I am treated “*just-as-if-I’d never sinned*”. This is an *all or nothing declaration*. I am *either guilty or innocent, ...either condemned or “justified”*. If I am condemned, I come under judgment and lose many of my rights and freedoms. **If I am “justified”, or acquitted, I have all the rights, privileges and standing before the Law “just-as-if-I’d been totally innocent**. In our modern court system, this would be true, even if my case were thrown out on a technicality, or if there had been some improper procedure followed by the police or the prosecutor’s office, ...even though I may, in fact, have been guilty. **Theologians refer to this as righteousness which is “imputed” or “put on” you.**

Secondly, God has made a way for His righteousness to actually *come into us to make us righteous*, like Him. This is what being born again (literally, “born from above” – Jn. 3:3-7) is all about. God actually puts our old self to death with Jesus (Rom. 6:2-9; Gal. 2:20), thus fulfilling the just requirement of the Law (Gal. 2:19; Rom. 7:4-6), and makes us new by the resurrecting, regenerating, recreating power of the Holy Spirit (Col. 2:10-13; Tit. 3:5; II Cor. 5:17). **His Spirit dwells in us to give us life, transform us into the image and character of Christ, and put within us the experience of the glory of God** (II Cor. 3:5-4:7), ...the very thing which Paul said we were lacking. It is by walking in and with the Spirit that we find freedom from sin and the ability to walk in righteousness (Gal. 5:13-25). **Theologians would call this kind of righteousness the “imparted” righteousness of God, ...because it has been infused into our lives from outside of ourselves**. In this way, we do actually become “righteous-i-fied” in our day-to-day walk. When Christ returns, the old sinful self will be left behind, and the new, born-from-above, “righteous-i-fied” self will be *fully glorified* to become completely like Jesus in our character (I Jn. 3:1-3; I Cor. 15:20-23,35-58).

How does this “justification” come to us? Paul says *it comes to us as a free gift* (vs. 24). We cannot earn it, because we are already disqualified. We blew it already, remember? **The only way we can be “just-as-if-I’d never sinned” is if we accept the gift which is offered to us by God. We can only accept it by faith** (Eph. 2:8,9).

Where does this gift come from? Paul tells us that the gift of God’s grace came “through the redemption which was in Christ Jesus”. What is a “redemption”? The word refers to *securing the release of someone by means of the payment of a ransom on their behalf*. In other words, Christ gave *His life in payment for yours*. As we said above, *every sin* had to be paid for. God’s sense of justice demands it. Christ voluntarily chose to pay your debt so that you could live to serve God (Heb. 9:11-15). **The term came from the slave market, where someone would pay the price to buy a slave out of bondage to be a free person**. Usually the debt involved a sum of money. In this case, however, *the wages of sin*, the curse of the Law, *was death* (Rom. 6:23; Gal. 3:13,14; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:13,14). Therefore, **in order to fulfill the just requirement of the Law, Christ had to give His life in exchange for yours** (cf. Isa. 53:4-8).

The next few verses return to the theme of God’s integrity. Verse 25 says that **God openly presented Jesus as a propitiation, a satisfactory sacrifice** or a “mercy seat” (the word is the same as the word used in the Greek OT for the mercy seat – e.g., Ex. 25:17). **The point of the word is that it would satisfy wrath, remove sin and restore favor**. The fact that, in this verse, God set Jesus forward as a satisfactory sacrifice means that **everyone who would see the worth of the sacrifice will recognize that it is more than adequate to remove any debt**. There can be no question that Jesus’ own life is a satisfactory substitute for the souls of humanity. Note that twice more in vss. 25,26 the point is made that **this act was a demonstration that God is righteous**. **First, we can now see that God was righteous to have overlooked the sins people committed in the past**; and, **secondly, we can now see that He is righteous at the present time to overlook the sin of people who have faith in Jesus**. The offering of Jesus’ precious life would silence forever those critics who would say God was passing over their sins unjustly. No. A payment for their sins had to be made. A man had to make the payment for human sin. So, **the answer of God’s grace to His justice was John 3:16. He became a man to offer payment for human sin with His own life blood**. Since His blood was precious beyond measure, the blood of the Creator Himself, no one can say that consequences were unfairly removed or skipped. No. *Every sin had to be covered* by the blood of Jesus. *Every crime was answered* by the blood of grace. **Thus, God will be forever righteous to forgive any sin covered by the blood of His Son, and He is just to “justify” anyone having faith in Jesus** (cf. I Jn. 1:9).

The final few verses of the chapter are Paul’s answer to hypothetical objections, probably based upon actual questions given by his opponents. **First, is there a basis for boasting?** No. Why? Because salvation is not about anything we have done. God justifies those who trust in Him, rather than *their own efforts*. **Second, is God the God of Jews only?** No. He is the God of *all people*, who justifies *any who believe*. **Finally, does this nullify the OT Law?** No. In fact, this ingenious plan *will fulfill the Law of God* by actually *putting His righteousness in our hearts*.