

God the Just and Justifier

Romans 3:25-26

June 25, 2017

Introduction:

Ferguson, Missouri is not a place most people had ever heard of unless they had the misfortune of living in the St. Louis area as I once did, but for a couple of weeks in August of 2014, the city of Ferguson became a household name. In Ferguson a young black man named Michael Brown was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, which resulted in a series of protests and riots that made national news and sparked a national debate on the question of police violence toward minorities. Over the next few years, other protests arose in different cities as new incidents came to light from cell phone footage of police officers seeming to use excessive force towards unarmed black men.

While many heated discussions arose on social media over whether the police responded with excessive force or not, regardless of what you thought of the Michael Brown incident, one thing was clear: the people of Ferguson strongly believed they were being denied justice. They looked at the acquittal of officer Wilson and other white police officers and saw it as white men getting away with murder. And so, in an overflow of their built up anger and frustration, they took to the streets to draw attention to the gross injustice they had been experiencing, with Michael Brown's death as emblematic of the systemic issue of racial injustice in their community.

I bring up the protests in Ferguson to demonstrate how much the issue of justice matters to us. None of us are happy to see someone whom we regard as guilty go free, whether it's the African-American residents of Ferguson regarding Darren Wilson or white folks when Judge Ito ruled in favor of O. J. Simpson's defense that argued, "If the glove don't fit, you must acquit." Every one of us, regardless of our race, believe justice should be served, that the guilty should be punished for the crimes they've committed.

The idea of justice stands at the center of the passage we'll be looking at this morning, but not the question of social justice but God's justice. In essence, the question can be stated like this: If all are sinners and yet God declares some of those sinners to be righteous, how then can God be considered just? Is this not a case of the guilty being acquitted and thus justice is not being served? Isn't God perverting justice by allowing the guilty go free?

To answer those questions, we need to examine what the apostle Paul has to say, so if you would be so kind, please open your Bibles to the third chapter of Romans, which can be found on pg. 941 of the pew Bibles, for those of you utilizing one of those this morning. Since our passage this morning starts in the middle of a sentence, I'll begin reading a couple of verses back so we retain the context. So we'll begin at the end of v. 22 but our real focus will be on v. 25-26. So then, please follow along as I read Romans 3:22-26.

"For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Our passage today revolves around a big 25 cent theological word that is used in v. 25, the word “**propitiation.**” If you’re using the NIV, you not going to find that word because the translators opted for a less-difficult option, translating it as “**sacrifice of atonement.**” But we’re going to stick with the ESV translation and learn the meaning of a rare but highly important word and see how the meaning of that term helps us understand how God is just in allowing the guilty to go free. So let’s begin with our first point which concerns...

1. How propitiation redeems us from God’s wrath

We’ll start with a bit of review. Beginning in 1:18 and running through 3:20, the apostle Paul made his case that we’re all under the wrath of God for our sin. Like a prosecuting attorney, Paul laid out proof after proof that we’ve failed to honor God and give him thanks and that we’ve disobeyed his word repeatedly, whether it was the Mosaic Law given to the Jews or the moral law written on the hearts of Gentiles. So when Paul writes in v. 23 that “**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” he’s summing up the case he’s laid out over the past three chapters and effectively saying, “We are all guilty as charged.”

But the question of justice comes in when in v. 24 Paul goes on to say we’re “**justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**” To be justified is to be declared righteous. It’s a legal term that mean essentially, “Not guilty.” When officer Darren Wilson and O. J. Simpson were declared “not guilty” of breaking the law, they were justified before the court. So then we have Paul saying in v. 23 that all are guilty of sin but then in v. 24 tells us God has justified us, that is, declared us to be “not guilty” as an act of grace through Christ. It would be as if all the evidence in a court was presented that makes it beyond any reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty and yet the judge says that while there is no question of the man’s guilt, he is feeling gracious today and so declares him “not guilty” and lets him walk out of the courtroom a free man. Would that not seem to you to be a travesty of justice? What would you make of a judge who in spite of all the condemning evidence allowed the defendant to go free without having to pay for his crimes?

So then, that’s the objection facing Paul. If the gospel he preaches is true, if God has justified sinners by grace through faith in Christ, how can God possibly be just? How can he declare someone not guilty when they are in fact guilty? We’re outraged when we believe a human judge has acquitted the guilty; should we not also feel the same if God Almighty allows sinners off the hook?

This is where “**propitiation**” - our 25 cent theological word - comes in. It’s a word we don’t use in our normal vocabulary but its meaning isn’t too difficult to understand. It carries with it the idea of appeasement or satisfaction, of turning away wrath. Most religions understand this concept. God or the gods are angry and thus the worshipper must appease the divine through some act or offering. Giving an animal sacrifice or making a pilgrimage or whatever it is they do is meant to *propitiate* the wrath of the

gods so that they are no longer angry with you. Or to take the same idea into a more mundane realm, a parent may find they have a screaming child throwing a vicious temper tantrum on the floor of the local supermarket. In order to temporarily appease his wrath, mom offers him a bag of M&M's if he'll stop crying and get back into the shopping cart. If you've ever done something like that, then you were *propitiating* your child. So big word, but the concept is fairly easy.

So with that understanding in mind, we're in a better position to appreciate what Paul is saying in v. 25. Look there with me. He describes Jesus Christ as one **“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”** So what Paul is saying here is that God's wrath has been appeased or satisfied by Christ. Yes, there is wrath, but Jesus propitiated it, such that God's wrath has been satisfied by Christ instead of being poured out on us.

Now we need to see how this works because what Paul says here is remarkable and we dare not glance too quickly at this verse and miss what it has to teach us. First, I want to call your attention to who makes the propitiation. Normally, the one who is facing the wrath is the one who makes propitiation. If the gods are angry with you, then you need to come up with the fruit or grain or animal sacrifice to appease their wrath. When your kid is embarrassing you by stomping his feet and screaming at the top of his lungs in the cereal aisle of Hy-Vee, you're the one frantically trying to come up with a way to bribe him to stop so the workers there stop thinking you're a terrible mom. You must appease the wrath of another.

But that's not how it works with God. Paul tells us that, **“God put [Jesus] forward as a propitiation.”** God is the one who appeases his own wrath. That's astonishing. No other religion teaches such a thing. Since we cannot appease God's wrath ourselves, God does for us what we cannot. Hence Paul describes our justification in v. 24 as being, “by his grace as a gift.” God was under no obligation to satisfy his own wrath. To simply allow his wrath to fall on us for our sins would have been perfectly just and fair: God gives the law, we break the law, and therefore we suffer the punishment for our disobedience. Justice is done and everyone gets what they deserve.

But God chooses to take it upon himself to appease his own wrath for our sake. He doesn't need to but in grace he does. How does he do that? Well, looking back at v. 25 Paul describes it as a **“propitiation by his blood”** referring of course to the blood of Christ. Like a sacrificial Passover Lamb, Christ has to suffer death in our place in order to redeem us. Hebrews 9:22 tells us that, *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”* On the cross, Christ became our substitute, suffering God's wrath for our sin as he became sin for us. God's wrath is satisfied because the just judgment against sin was indeed carried out: Jesus was forsaken by the Father for our sake. As a result, God's wrath has been propitiated: sin has been punished. While we did not suffer the penalty for our sin, the penalty was still paid. There was a high cost incurred by our sin and that price was paid, not by us, but by Christ on our behalf.

Furthermore, Paul says that in order to receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, it must be **“received by faith.”** Though all are sinners without exception, only those who

trust in Christ will have their sins propitiated. While Christ's sacrifice is such that all who believe can be saved, only those who do believe will be saved. Those who do not believe still stand under the wrath of God. Christ atoning work is only applied to us by faith; without it, God's wrath is not appeased and so those who reject Christ remain in their guilt and condemnation.

So then, that's how propitiation redeems us from God's wrath: by faith we believe that Christ suffered in our place on the cross, forsaken by God as our sin was reckoned to be his, so that God's wrath would be appeased. But now Paul pulls the camera back as it were to a wide-angle lens to see the larger purposes of God in redeeming us. Not only does the cross redeem us, but it also vindicates God in the process. It shows that God is truly righteous in that he justly deals with sin while at the same time justifies sinners. So moving on now, our second point deals with...

2. How propitiation shows God's righteousness in the past

In the middle of v. 25 Paul says "**This** (referring to the propitiation of Christ on our behalf) **was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.**" So the cross has a goal beyond merely redeeming sinners: God was using it to demonstrate to the world his righteousness, meaning he was showing us all in the cross that he was indeed the righteous judge who would do right by punishing sins. The cross is a testimony to God's righteous character.

You need to understand that previously, the sins of all those in the OT were in fact left unpunished. Yes, they Jews performed all kinds of animal sacrifices but none of them actually accomplished the removal of the guilt of sin. Turn for a moment to Hebrews 10 if you would. You can find it on pg. 1006 in the pew Bibles. In v. 3-4 of Hebrews 10 we find a clear statement of what stands behind what Paul is speaking of in Romans 3. It says in v. 3-4, "*But in these sacrifices, there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*"

All those animal sacrifices were place-holders, mere pictures of what the true sacrificial lamb would one day do, and as a result, they didn't actually deal with sin. God didn't deal with their sins until Christ suffered and died on their behalf. The sins of Abraham and Moses and David were all left unpunished for centuries until Christ came. God in his "**divine forbearance**" overlooked them for the time being. He allowed them to remain unpunished until the cross.

Now the problem that can come from this, and still does, is that people can accuse God of being unrighteous because he doesn't punish sin immediately. We who live after the cross can have the same objection as those who lived before the cross, and that is why isn't justice being served *right now*. This was the experience of Elie Wiesel.

Perhaps some of you have read Elie Wiesel book *Night*. It tells of his experience in the German concentration camp of Auschwitz. It is not a book for the fainthearted as he relates the horrors he experienced during the Holocaust. In one of the most often quoted passages of his book, Wiesel writes this,

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.
Never.”

For Elie Wiesel, he could not continue to believe in a God who would allow such a thing to happen. Immediate justice was what he wanted: God should have opened up the ground to swallow the Nazis for their crimes against humanity, or lightning should have fallen from the sky to punish them for their atrocities, and yet there was nothing. God in his forbearance had chosen not to bring down the hammer of justice in the here and now and for Elie Wiesel, that was not a God he could worship. God was to him an unjust God, an indifferent God, who passively looked on while the wicked thrived and the innocent suffered.

The OT is full of such tensions as well. Job questioned God’s righteousness when he considered his innocence and his suffering. The Psalmist in Psalm 73 said his feet almost stumbled when he considered the prosperity of the wicked. These are examples of the tension raised by God’s forbearance towards our sin. When we don’t see justice immediately done, we begin to question God’s righteousness because it seems from our perspective that God is silent, that he is passive, that he really isn’t just because the wicked continue to thrive without any repercussions.

But the cross demonstrates that God is righteous. Just because justice did not come immediately did not mean it would never come at all. The cross is God’s way of saying, “I am just. I will punish sin. All the sin which I left unpunished was not forgotten or ignored or swept under the rug: my wrath was poured out against sin upon my only-begotten Son.” Thus by propitiating God’s wrath on the cross, God showed to the world that he truly is the just judge who will not leave sin unpunished but that he would see that justice would be eventually be done.

But while this point addresses how God could be righteous for allowing the sins of the past to go temporarily unpunished, our last point concerns how God’s righteousness is shown in the present. So moving on now, our third and final point is this...

3. How propitiation shows God’s righteousness in the present

Look back in your Bibles with me at v. 26. **“It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in**

Jesus.” In the past, because God left those sins unpunished, it could be concluded that God was not just because he didn't give people what they deserved when they deserved it. But now, in the present, God has revealed himself to be righteous in that through the cross God is revealed as both just and justifier. By Jesus acting at the propitiation for our sin, God has shown himself to be righteous in that he has indeed punished sin and at the same time declared righteous those who are sinners.

That's the amazingly good news of the gospel: God justifies sinners while at the same time remains just. God is first just because he does punish sin, all sin. He doesn't violate his righteous character by pretending sin is no big deal. He punishes sin. All sin will be justly punished: either Christ has already suffered the wrath of God on our behalf on the cross or we will personally face the wrath of God when we stand before him in judgment. Justice has been and will be served.

Therefore, we're wrong to question God when he doesn't strike people down as soon as they sin. We dare not take the fact that he's slow to anger and abounding in love to imply that he's uncaring or unjust. In fact, the reason we can do what Jesus said and turn the other cheek and not seek out revenge towards those who hurt us is because we believe God is just and either has judged their sin already on the cross or will judge their sin at the Final Judgment. Any time we take matters into our own hands and seek to get people back for what they did to us, we betray a disbelief in God's ultimate justice. It's as if we're saying, "God, I don't trust you do act justly, so I'm going to do something about it while there is still time." The cross is our reminder that God has and will punish sin. If he didn't hold back on Jesus and forsook him as Christ became sin for us, then we can be certain that he will also justly judge sin in the future for those who do not have Christ as their atoning sacrifice by faith.

But the even greater glory is that the one who is just is also our justifier. It would have been just for God to send us all to hell. But by taking our sins upon himself, by pouring out the punishment we deserve upon Christ instead of us, we can be declared "not guilty" because justice has been done. We can stand before him righteous because the penalty for our sins has been fully paid. Thus Paul will say later in Romans 8:1 that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." There is no double jeopardy, where someone has to suffer punishment twice for the same crime. Since Jesus paid it all, God's wrath is satisfied: there's no punishment left for us. Through the propitiation of Christ, God is both just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

So then, as we wrap things up, stand in awe of the God who propitiated his own wrath by giving us his Son. Through Christ, God's wrath is satisfied against us and we're declared righteous, not by anything we have done, but solely by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Let give him the glory, honor, thanks, and praise he deserves, today and always. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.