

Session 4

JUSTIFIED

All who accept the gospel by faith are justified before the Father.

ROMANS 3:21–4:3

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most of us want to avoid the embarrassment that comes with having our debit card denied or realizing we are a dollar short and unable to pay for the meal we just ordered. When those things happen, it feels like the eyes of everyone are suddenly on us. Paul reminded the Roman believers they all fell short when it came to God's righteousness. He also explained that through faith in Jesus, we find God's grace and His willingness to cover our shortcomings.

(In PSG, p. 34) **Which would be a greater embarrassment: having your card denied at a restaurant or realizing you are a dollar short at a cash-only restaurant? Explain.**

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ROMANS 3:21–4:25

The first few verses of this section are packed with words that give us insight into how we attain a right relationship with God. Just as there is no distinction in our sinful state (3:23), so there is no distinction in our access to God's righteousness; it is available to all who believe (3:22). That righteousness is achieved by God's grace, through God's redemption of us in Christ Jesus (3:24). God initiated that redemption by offering Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (3:25), which demonstrated that God was righteous in the way He has dealt with sin (3:25-26).

Using a series of questions and answers, Paul established that God was the God of the Jews and the Gentiles, and as such, He would justify them both through faith. Since there is no distinction between the two groups, either in sin or in access to God's righteousness, no one has a ground for boasting; we are all sinners justified by faith. Paul next raised the question as to whether faith nullified the law. His answer was a definitive no. Earlier, Paul had affirmed that there was an advantage both to being a Jew and to circumcision (3:1-2), just not as a means to justification.

Paul concluded this section by using Abraham as an example of justification by faith. Because Abraham was not justified by works, he had no grounds to boast. A person considers wages as something earned and, therefore, something that the person deserves. However, Abraham believed, and God graciously counted his faith as righteousness (4:1-8). Both circumcision and the law came after the promise and after Abraham's faith. While Abraham waited for an heir, he continued to believe that God would grant him a great nation. Paul ended this section with a reminder that faith is also counted as righteousness for those of us who believe (4:24).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THROUGH FAITH (ROM. 3:21-24)

VERSES 21-23

²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. ²² The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. ²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The phrase *but now* contrasts Paul's previous discussion about the wrath of God (Rom. 1:18–3:20) with his present discussion about the righteousness of God. At the beginning of his letter, Paul identified the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,” because it is in the gospel that “the righteousness of God is revealed” (1:16-17). Paul made it clear that no one, whether Jew or Gentile, could expect to be made right with God through works of the law (3:20). Through the law we know only the presence of sin, for *the righteousness of God* has been made known *apart from the law*. The covenant based on the law had been superseded (Heb. 8:7-13), so that everyone who believes, whether Jew or Gentile, has access to God's righteousness apart from adhering to the regulations of the Law given to Moses. There is a discontinuity between the old covenant and God's revelation of His righteousness in Christ, but there is continuity as well. The phrase *the Law and the Prophets* refers to the Old Testament, specifically as it bears witness to God's righteousness. Right standing before God cannot be achieved through human effort under the old system of the Law, but the Old Testament attests to God's activity in providing righteousness. Paul's words echo Jeremiah's prophecy, quoted by the writer of Hebrews, of a new covenant written on people's hearts (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:8-12).

Paul repeated the phrase *the righteousness of God*, adding to it another element he had introduced in Romans 1:16-17—the element of faith. The Greek phrase translated *through faith in Jesus Christ* can be understood in two ways. The traditional view is to understand Jesus as the object of the believer's faith. In this view, righteousness is revealed through the believer's faith in Jesus. The Greek word translated *faith* can also mean “faithfulness.” In this case, Paul's point would have been that the righteousness of God has been revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus to the Father. Both ideas are obviously true: if Jesus had not been faithful to the Father, then our faith in Him would mean nothing. Paul's point seems to have been the role of faith in the revelation of God's righteousness. Paul reiterated the point with the following phrase: *to all who believe*. Righteousness is only available through faith in Christ Jesus, but it is available to everyone who has that faith.

Paul's conclusion here is grounded in his argument in 1:18–3:20. No distinction exists between Jews and everyone else. Paul later used the same Greek word translated *distinction* to emphasize the accessibility of the blessings of God in salvation to all who believe (10:12-13). The reason *there is no distinction* is because of the sinful state of all people. Paul used two phrases to describe that sinful relationship. First, *all have sinned*, and as a result, all people stand equally under the judgment of God. Second, as a result of that sin, all *fall short of the glory of God*. Paul likely was referring to the glory that had resulted from humans being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), an image that was marred, but not destroyed, as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience.

VERSE 24

²⁴ They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Just as there is no distinction in regard to our sin before God, there is also no distinction in our access to God's justification. Paul's point is not that everyone who sinned will be *justified* (universalism), but that everyone has access to that justification. Based on our sinful standing before God, we deserve only God's judgment. However, in Christ, God has rendered a verdict of not guilty. In this verse, Paul described the mode or manner and the means

of that verdict. First, we have been justified *freely by his grace*. God's unmerited love for us led Him to offer to us something that we could not attain through our own effort. We have nothing to offer and depend totally on God's grace. Therefore, our only hope is to receive by faith what has been freely given.

The means of our justification is *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. The Greek word translated *redemption* was often used to indicate the liberation of slaves or prisoners of war through the payment of a price. Paul used the word twice in connection with forgiveness of sins (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14) and twice more in connection with the role of the Holy Spirit in securing believers for a future day in which our redemption will be complete (Eph. 1:14; 4:30). In Paul's only other use of the word, he connected our redemption to our adoption as children of God (Rom. 8:23). Given Paul's connection between redemption and forgiveness, it is best to understand our redemption as liberation from the sin that placed us under God's judgment.

(In PSG, p. 37) **What word or phrase in verse 24 stands out the most? How does that word or phrase counter the reality of verse 23?**

IN JESUS (ROM. 3:25-26)

VERSES 25-26

²⁵ God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. ²⁶ God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul's main point is expressed in the initial words of verse 25: *God presented him [Jesus] as an atoning sacrifice*. It is important to notice that God is the one who initiated the entire process of redemption. Human beings have nothing to offer that would serve as a sacrifice to atone for sins.

The greatest point of discussion in this verse is the meaning of the Greek word translated *atoning sacrifice*. The word appears only one other time in the New Testament, where it describes the covering on the ark of the covenant on which the high priest sprinkled the blood of a goat on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:5). This covering was the mercy seat where God accomplished the atonement for the sins of the people. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the same word was used frequently to describe this covering over the ark. The Greek word translated *presented* can be used to describe what is publicly displayed. The sprinkling of the goat's blood was hidden behind the curtain in the holy of holies, but God publicly presented Jesus as our atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Paul explained how Jesus functioned as our atoning sacrifice. The phrase *in his blood* designates Jesus' death on the cross as the means by which the sacrifice was attained. The benefits of this sacrifice are received through faith.

Paul maintained that God's purpose in presenting Jesus as an atoning sacrifice was to make clear God's own *righteousness*. In its only two occurrences in the New Testament outside of Romans, the Greek word translated *demonstrate* means "to prove" (2 Cor. 8:24; Phil. 1:28). The word can also mean "to show." The point in either case is that in the cross we can see God's righteousness at work. The phrase *sins previously committed* refers to sins committed before Jesus' sacrificial death initiated a new age of forgiveness and salvation. God, in His restraint, allowed those sins to go unpunished until the cross, when God's righteous character was demonstrated to the world. God's restraint was designed to allow people to experience the kindness of God that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Just as God's righteousness was seen in His restraint in allowing past sins to go unpunished, so Christ's atoning sacrifice demonstrates God's righteousness in the present age. In the cross, the holy God atoned for sin through the sacrifice of His Son. For that reason, God declares righteous *the one who has faith in Jesus*. As believers, we can rest assured that our righteousness is secure in Christ.

How would you explain Jesus' atoning sacrifice for our sins to a person who is not a believer? What illustrations or analogies could you use to explain unfamiliar words like *sacrifice*?

FOR ALL PEOPLE (ROM. 3:27-31)

VERSES 27-28

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By one of works? No, on the contrary, by a law of faith. ²⁸ For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

Paul again used a series of rhetorical questions and answers on the topic of boasting to drive home his defense of justification by faith. The initial question challenged the possibility of *boasting*, a topic Paul dealt with earlier (2:17,23). Not all boasting is bad. Paul boasted "in the hope of the glory of God" (5:2), about a fellow worker (2 Cor. 7:14), and even about his own weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). However, boasting of one's right standing with God was excluded.

The meaning of the word *law* in verse 27 is unclear. Normally, Paul used the word to indicate the Law of Moses, although the word can be used to mean "principle." Paul, then, would be comparing the principle of works and the principle of faith. In either case, works and faith stand in opposition to each other. A law of faith precludes all boasting.

Paul rounded off this series of questions with a summary of his earlier teaching, giving more insight into what he meant by *the law of faith*. Paul had already affirmed that no person could be justified through *works of the law* (Rom. 3:20). The law or principle of faith meant that the only way anyone could be right before God was *by faith*. Since justification can only come through faith in Christ, no grounds exist for boasting.

VERSES 29-31

²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then nullify the law through faith? Absolutely not! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

The conjunction *or* indicates Paul was changing tactics. If one could be justified through works of the law (a position that Paul did not accept), what would that say about God? A basic tenet of the Jewish faith was that God was one (Deut. 6:4). To drive home his point, Paul asked back-to-back questions, each expecting a different answer. He answered the second question, implying the answer to the first question. God must be the God of both Jews and Gentiles, or the Gentiles would have no God, since God is one.

Paul's conclusion drawn from the two questions in verse 29 was that the one God would *justify* both the *Jews* and the *Gentiles* by faith. Paul used slightly different wording for each group: the *circumcised by faith* and the *uncircumcised through faith*. Some Bible teachers have tried to draw a distinction between *by* and *through*. However, most of the suggestions for what that distinction would be have been highly nuanced and are not very convincing. It makes more sense that Paul simply varied the two prepositions for stylistic reasons. Paul's point is clear: God would justify both Jews and Gentiles through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Faith prohibits boasting.

One might surmise, based on Paul's emphasis on faith, that the law had no value any longer. Paul's answer to whether the law was now invalid was a resounding *Absolutely not!* While he insisted on a continuing role for the law, Paul did not explain here what his claim to *uphold the law* might mean. Paul probably had in mind here what he spelled out later: God did what the law, weakened by sin, could not do, so that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in those who walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh (Rom. 8:3-4).

In what ways should Paul’s teaching that God is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles affect the way that we relate to people groups around the world? How should it affect our prayer lives and our giving?

INCLUDING ABRAHAM (ROM. 4:1-3)

VERSE 1

¹ What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

Paul next turned to *Abraham* as a test case for his doctrine of justification by faith apart from works of the law. Paul devoted all of chapter 4 to discussing the various ways Abraham demonstrated that justification came through faith. Abraham was venerated for his relationship with God. Surely if anyone had a right to boast, it would have been Abraham.

VERSES 2-3

² If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about — but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness.

Paul asked his readers to suppose for the sake of argument that Abraham had been able to be *justified by works*. In that case, Paul argued, Abraham would have had a right to boast; however, Paul quickly interjected that Abraham’s boasting would not be before God. Some Bible teachers have suggested Paul’s point was that Abraham would have grounds for boasting before other people but not before God. While the text could be interpreted that way, the context shows that Paul’s point of comparison was not between Abraham and others but between justification by faith and justification by works. The God who justified Abraham by faith was the God who justified the Gentiles and the Jews by faith. Therefore, there was no ground for boasting at all.

To solidify his argument, Paul appealed to Scripture, specifically Genesis 15:6. This is the first time the word *believe* occurs in the Bible, and it is connected with the word *righteousness*. The context was Abraham’s concern that the promise God made earlier (Gen. 12) had not yet been fulfilled. Rather than a sea of descendants, Abraham had no children and his slave was his only heir (15:4). In response to God’s renewed promise, Abraham trusted God, who “credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Throughout Romans 4, Paul reminded his readers that Abraham’s faith came before the sign of circumcision was given to him (Gen. 17) and before Abraham’s signature obedience to God’s command to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen. 22).

The spiritual transaction that took place in Abraham’s heart is described with business terminology: *credited*. Abraham deposited his trust in God’s words, as demonstrated by his willingness to obey. God recorded that faith as a credit to his account. Abraham’s debt was paid in full by his faith in God—just as ours is paid through our faith in Christ.

(In PSG, p. 41) **How does the faith of Abraham compare to the faith required of believers today?**

KEY DOCTRINE

Man

By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race (1 John 1:8-10).

BIBLE SKILL

Use a Bible dictionary.

Look up the words “expiation” and “propitiation” in a Bible dictionary (either print or online). Read the following verses: Luke 18:13; Hebrews 2:17; 9:15; 1 John 2:2; 4:10. Read Exodus 25:17-22; 30:10. Compare the Old

Testament description of sacrifice with the New Testament passages. Summarize the insights you gained about Jesus' sacrifice for our sins.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Abraham in the New Testament" in the Spring 2020 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.