

# God the Just and Justifier

*Psalm 85:1-3; Romans 3:21-31*

By Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • August 8, 2021 (BSCC)

**D**ear Congregation of Christ: In 1781, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.” Jefferson’s life and words reflect his conflicted morality. He knew that slavery is wrong and so must end, but he did not know how to end it. He himself owned nearly 200 slaves.

However, within these words, he believed that God is just, and if we violated his justice and morality, we are in big trouble. And not just big trouble; we face God’s wrath. Although Jefferson was not a true Christian—he was merely a deist, a believer in a Supreme Being—he was right. Our text today says that God is not only gracious and merciful. Rather, he is also just and righteous and administers justice and righteousness in this world in the past, present and future. Do you tremble for the wickedness of our nation today?

Our text begins with the words, “But now” in verse 21. Here, Paul is going back to the previous verse, verse 20, where he says, “*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*” No Jew will be justified or saved from God’s wrath by obedience to the Law of Moses. And no Gentile will be justified by doing good works according to his conscience. Salvation from sin and God’s wrath is only through faith alone in Christ alone who died as a substitute for us sinners.

In the old covenant with his people the Jews, God provided the Law so they will know they are sinners before a holy God. Still, the means of salvation for them was not obedience to the Law, but through faith in the promised Messiah, the Anointed Son of God. In the new covenant, salvation is still through faith alone in Jesus who revealed himself to the world as the only true Messiah 2,000 years ago.

We will study these and a few other questions in our meditation today entitled, **the Just and Justifier**, under three headings: first, **God is Just and Righteous**; second, **All are Sinners Under God’s Righteous Justice**; and third, **God is the Justifier of Sinners**.

## **God is Just and Righteous**

In an earlier lesson, we learned that the verse that turned the life of Protestant Reformer Martin Luther is Romans 1:17, “*For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’*” Paul repeats this statement in verse 21, “*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.*” But what is Paul referring to in “the righteousness of God”? Initially, we think of one of the perfect attributes of God, such as all-knowing, all-powerful, or all-loving. God is perfectly righteous, holy and just, which we sang in

“Holy, Holy, Holy!” God is not 99 percent all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, righteous, holy and just. He is 100 percent in all his attributes.

But God’s righteousness is not only in his perfect attributes. He is also righteous in his judgments. Last Sunday, we mentioned that King David confessed and repented of his sins in Psalm 51, knowing that God will forgive him according to his justice and righteousness, “*so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment*” (v 4). And after God forgives him, he vows, “*I will sing aloud of your righteousness*” (v 14), even if God punished him for his sins.

Therefore, last week, we also sang “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness,” where we sang, “Bold shall I stand in thy great day; for who ought to my charge shall lay? Fully absolved through these I am from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.” Paul often speaks of Judgment Day as a day when God will sit on his throne in his heavenly court judging everyone who ever lived in this world. In his justice and righteousness, he will not acquit sinners who rejected the salvation that our Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for them. But when a believer stands before him, he will say that he is “fully absolved” of all his sins. How does God come to this “not guilty” verdict on sinners? Only because Christ has fully and perfectly accomplished all the commandments of God for his people who always come short of God’s requirement of perfect holiness. Paul says this in verse 22, “*the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*”

The Jews always believed that they were God’s chosen people even after Jesus came to save all who believe in him—Jews and Gentiles. But Paul argues against this false assurance, “*there is no distinction.*” All who believe in Christ will be saved; all who reject Christ will suffer God’s wrath. This “no distinction” applies to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, kings and peasants. God’s justice applies to everyone.

Contrary to the teaching of many churches, salvation for the Jews and all others in the Old Testament was not based on obedience to the Law of Moses. Salvation, then and now, is grounded in true faith in God and his Son Jesus Christ. Paul quoted the prophet Habakkuk, “*The righteous shall live by faith*” (2:4). And in Romans 4:3, Paul quotes Moses in Genesis 15:6, “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*” Therefore, Paul says, “*the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it*” (v 21)—the righteousness of God—in saving all who believe in him and his Son, while condemning all who reject him and his Son. This is the only distinction that matters: whether one believes or not. On Judgment Day, there are only two kinds of people: the sheep and the goats. The sheep are judged “Not Guilty!” and welcomed into heaven. The goats are condemned and sent into eternal hell (Matt 25:31-46).

Therefore, God’s righteousness was revealed “*apart from the law.*” What does Paul mean here? He was referring to the law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. God’s righteousness and justice in saving sinners are not grounded in obedience to God’s laws, in doing good works. Last week, I mentioned that the prophet Isaiah said that without faith, man’s “good works” are “polluted garments” in God’s sight (Isa 64:6). The writer of Hebrews also says the same thing, “*Without faith, it is impossible to please God*” (11:6). And Paul teaches this, “*For by grace you have been saved*

*through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*” (Eph 2:8-9). Our salvation is “not a result of works.” Rather, our good works are the fruits of our salvation, the fruits of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit who gives us faith in Christ (Gal 3:22-25).

God is merciful, but he is also just, *“forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty”* (Exo 34:7).

### **All are Sinners Under God’s Righteous Justice**

In complete opposition to God’s righteousness and justice, Paul says, *“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* (v 23). While God is 100 percent just and righteous, all human beings come short of his justice and righteousness. In fact, we fail miserably. We often hear Christians say that because a person is “basically good,” God gives him a failing grade of 50 or 60, the passing grade being 70.

But God gives us a grade of 0, not 50 or 60. We get a grade of zero. But even if God gives us a grade of 99, we still fail in his courtroom. Our “good works” are overwhelmed by our sins. We may be “basically good” in the eyes of others, but we are failed sinners in the eyes of God. As we are, we will never reach the glory of God, God’s required grade of 100 percent. Never. Not even when we are saved by God. Not in this life.

What about “the glory of God”? Does this mean that when we attain God’s glory, that we will be as “little gods,” as some televangelists and cults teach? No, we will never be “little gods.” In Romans 8:18, we read, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”* We will have a part of God’s glorious creation (Rom 8:21), because *“When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory”* (Col 3:4).

We will attain the glory of God only after our Lord Jesus Christ returns from heaven and gives us perfect resurrected bodies. Paul says that a Christian’s resurrected body is *“sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power”* (1 Cor 15:43). We will then be perfectly fit to dwell in the new heaven, the new earth, where we will never sin again, where we will not come short of God’s required perfect righteousness. How? Because he will give us Christ’s perfect righteousness for eternity.

### **God is the Justifier of Sinners**

In our text, Paul uses the word “righteousness” four times, and “just” and its derivatives like “justify,” and “justification” five times. These are big and important theological words. We have defined the “righteousness” of God. What about “justification”? We often hear this word in relation to another theological word, “sanctification.”

Justification in Hebrew and in Greek is often used in forensic or legal situations in the courtroom. We read in Exodus 34:7 that God does not “clear” or “acquit” the guilty. Justification is clearing or acquitting the guilty, a pronouncement of the defendant’s “not guilty” verdict. In his heavenly courtroom, God is the judge, jury and executioner. The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is one of the core doctrines of the 16th century Protestant Reformation led

by Martin Luther and John Calvin. The word “alone” is essential to our faith. We are not saved by faith and works, but by faith *alone*. There is no other Savior and Mediator except our Lord Jesus Christ *alone*. The other core doctrine is, of course, Scripture *alone*, not Scripture *and* tradition, is sufficient for Christian doctrine, worship and life. Unnumbered faithful Reformers gave their lives for these essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

Today, how many people who profess to be Christians even know what “justification” means? Is anyone willing to die for this doctrine? Would we even recognize a teaching about justification that is contrary to what Paul teaches? What then is this thing called “justification”? It is, simply, being declared righteous or just or acquitted in God’s courtroom by God. As in any human courtroom, it is a one-time declaration of acquittal. And we must not confuse justification with “sanctification.” In justification, God is not “making” us righteous. That is *sanctification*, a lifelong process in which God transforms us into the image of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

And how is anyone justified by God? Paul says in Romans 3:24 that we are “*justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*” As in Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul says that salvation is by God’s grace alone, this grace being a gift from God. The Holy Spirit gives us this grace and faith in Christ alone. This grace and faith are not a result or reward from God because of good works. Faith is solely a gift from God. Previously, in verse 20, Paul affirms, “*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.*” Later, Paul makes it clearer, “*a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified*” (Gal 2:16).

How then does Christ redeem us from sin? Paul says in verse 25 that God “*put forward [Christ] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*” Again, another big, important theological word that most Christians do not understand or even hear these days. To “propitiate” is to appease an offended person. When Christ willingly sacrificed himself on the cross, he appeased or satisfied God’s righteous and just wrath on sinners who believe in him. In Hebrews 9:5, the Greek word for “propitiation” is translated as the “mercy seat.” The mercy seat is the golden covering of the ark of the covenant in the temple. The ark of the covenant held the tablets of God’s law. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkles the blood of a bull on the mercy seat (Lev 16:14). This means that the mercy seat is a covering—a propitiation—of the sins of God’s people (Psa 32:1; 85:2).

So, in essence, “propitiation” is the appeasement of God’s holy wrath against our sins by covering our sins. And this is what Christ did for us: his blood on the cross satisfied God’s eternal wrath on sinners by covering our sins. John writes that Jesus is our advocate, our lawyer in God’s heavenly courtroom. But not only that; he himself is the “*propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 2:2). Our lawyer does not merely stand by our side to defend us. He defended us by taking upon himself the death sentence that God pronounced upon all sinners who have come short of his perfect requirements. Paul also alludes back to the Passover event when he writes, “*This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*” God’s sentence of death

passed over the houses of Israel when he saw the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Christ is this Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7). God waits patiently for his people to return to him through Christ.

**B**rothers and sisters in Christ, Paul concludes that God is not only just and righteous but is *“the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”* (v 26). He himself satisfied his righteous wrath against sinners by sending his own Son to cover our sins by his blood. All our justification was accomplished by God through Christ. We have no part in any way in it. Therefore, Paul says to the Jews and to all of us, *“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded”* (v 27). No one can boast that his “good works” contributed to his salvation. It is all of God and his Son our Lord Jesus Christ.