

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #17

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Why God's Demonstration of His Glory and Justice is the Most Loving Thing He Could Do

Romans 3:21-31

Do you remember the famous story told by Hans Christian Anderson concerning the Emperor and his clothes? According to the tale, a group of very clever con men approached an Emperor offering to weave for him a rare and costly garment that would be unlike any other garment in the world. This garment would have the marvelous, indeed, the magical capacity of revealing to the Emperor all the fools and idiots in his kingdom. Because of the special quality of the threads, *the garment could be seen only by the wise. It would be invisible to all fools and morons.*

Delighted with the prospect of discovering who the idiots were in his kingdom, the Emperor commissioned these swindlers, at great cost, to weave for him this magical garment. But to his own utter dismay, he suddenly realized that he was himself a fool, for when he visited these con men at work, he saw nothing on the looms. But of course, he had to pretend that he could see it, lest he also be known as a fool.

On the day of the grand parade, the con men collected their fee, dressed the Emperor with what was, of course, a non-existent garment, and skipped out of town laughing all the way to the bank. At the parade, the entire population joined the Emperor's attendants in praising the beauty and majesty of his new robes, none daring to admit that they saw nothing, none daring to admit that the Emperor was in fact naked. After all, they didn't want to be branded as self-confessed fools and morons.

The entire parade of folly collapsed, however, when a young child honestly and truthfully cried out aloud: *"The Emperor has no clothes!"* Neither the Emperor nor his subjects were admitting his nakedness until the little boy's truth destroyed their lie and exposed their hypocrisy and subjected them to shame and humiliation.

For three chapters now, in the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul, like that little boy, has been shouting aloud the truth that we, like the Emperor, have no clothes. We are naked in the sight of God, spiritually and morally naked. And yet we, like the Emperor and his subjects, have been living under the illusion that we are fully clothed in our beautiful and morally approved robes of righteous deeds. It has taken Paul three chapters to open our eyes to the shameful but all too real truth that we are in fact morally naked, that we lack that righteousness which will alone avail in God's presence.

Today I want you to think of the righteousness of God as if it were a garment, a robe, perhaps even a suit of clothes. But unlike the non-existent garment of the Emperor in Hans Christian Anderson's story, these righteous robes are oh, so very, very real. We who, because of sin and guilt and self-righteousness, stand

spiritually naked in God's sight. Our only hope is that somehow we might be clothed with the righteous robes of Jesus Christ. But how do we receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ? How might we clothe our nakedness and cover up our sinful selves and be adorned in the righteous robes of the Son of God? That is the question Paul asks and answers in this passage.

When we were previously in this paragraph, we devoted the entire time to defining three words: justification, redemption, and propitiation. These were the things that God accomplished for us through Jesus. Jesus propitiated the wrath of the Father against sinners, which is to say he satisfied all the demands of divine justice against us. In shedding his blood to propitiate the Father he also offered himself as a ransom to set us free. In other words, he secured redemption for us. And the result of this is that when we trust Christ and his sacrifice for us on the cross we are justified, we are declared righteous in God's sight and presence.

If these three words describe what God did for us in and through Jesus Christ, the rest of the paragraph describes *what God did for God*. You heard me right. When the Father sent the Son to die in our place and the Son, through the Spirit, offered himself up as a sinless sacrifice, God was also acting on his own behalf. *He was acting for the sake of his own name*. What he did for us through Jesus was also an act whereby he demonstrated his own righteousness, his own justice, and thereby vindicated his name in all the earth.

God Defending God (vv. 25b-26)

We pick up with Paul's argument in the middle of v. 25. There he says that the death of Jesus in which he shed his blood to propitiate the Father *"was to show God's righteousness."* In other words, before, beneath, and behind the decision of the Father to send the Son to die for you and me, and before, beneath, and behind the decision of the Son to willingly take on this task, the Triune God of Scripture, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was determined to demonstrate his righteousness so that all could see it. God was determined to make known to all creation that he is just and holy and infinitely glorious and deserving of all our devotion and gratitude and praise.

But why was this necessary? Who would ever have questioned if God was righteous and holy and deserving of praise? What possible grounds or reasons could there be for someone to doubt if God was good and righteous? Great question, a question Paul immediately answers in the second half of v. 25.

It was because *"in his divine forbearance he [God] had passed over former sins"* (Rom. 3:25b). When you read the OT and its many stories with so many unusual individuals, you read about a multitude of sins that appear to go unpunished. Justice is not immediately forthcoming. It seems that time and time again people who commit horrible atrocities get off scot free. Why, if God is just, does he appear only to wink at sin rather than punish it? This was all due to what Paul calls God's "divine forbearance."

All of you can relate to this in one form or another. As a child, after you disobeyed your mom or dad and you knew that discipline was coming, you were pleasantly surprised when they said: "Ok, I'm going to let you off the hook this time. But don't ever let it happen again." But then when it happened again and they said, "Well, I hope you learned your lesson, but I've decided not to ground you or spank you or punish

you in any way,” you began to wonder, “Do mom and dad even care what I do? Are they indifferent to my bad behavior?” It’s a valid question!

In their own way, your parents were exercising human forbearance, which is to say, they chose patience instead of punishment. For whatever reason, right or wrong, they decided not to impose what you expected would be harsh punishment of some sort. And if they persisted in this you would eventually scratch your head and wonder if they were just too busy to bother with you or truly couldn’t care less about your behavior. Eventually, the question would arise in your mind: “What kind of parent are you that you would allow your kids to behave like this without any consequence?”

I once read about an atheistic society that undertook a campaign to undermine and impugn God’s reputation as good and holy. The irony of this is that if they were truly atheists, they don’t even believe there is a “God” whose reputation needs to be undermined. So why bother? But aside from that obvious inconsistency, here is what they did.

They produced a leaflet that contained the pictures of several sinister looking individuals. Underneath each picture was the name of a prominent figure from the OT. The name of *Abraham* appeared beneath one photograph, with the statement: “What kind of God would be friends with a man who was willing to sacrifice his wife to save his own neck? What kind of God would be friends with a man who was willing to kill his own son as an act of obedience?”

The next rather unflattering photograph had the name of *Jacob* underneath it. The question again was asked: “What kind of God would appoint a man to be father of the 12 tribes of Israel who was a cheat and a deceitful liar?” Then there was yet another photo with the name of *Moses* associated with it. “What kind of God would appoint as leader of his people and mediator of his covenant a man who committed murder and became a fugitive from justice?” The final photograph had the name of *David* beneath it. Again, it read: “What kind of God would describe an adulterer and murderer as ‘a man after God’s own heart?’”

It’s not an outrageous question to ask. What kind of God is it who allows so much sin for so long a time to go unpunished? From the great flood in Noah’s day to the time of Christ’s birth, mankind as a whole appeared to sin with impunity. Yes, there were instances when God’s judgment fell dramatically, as was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah. But for several thousand years it seemed as if there was very little justice being meted out. ***There was no visible, universal manifestation of divine justice and retribution.*** Thus, God’s reputation as righteous and holy was open to public slander.

We read something similar in Acts 14:16. There Paul is speaking to the crowds at Lystra and says: “In past generations he allowed the nations to walk in their own ways.” During his speech on Mars Hill Paul again said, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

For centuries it appeared as if there were no justice. It seemed as if God simply didn’t care. This “passing over” of sins is not the same as forgiveness. But God’s forbearance in not exacting a judgment commensurate with their sin tended to obscure the truth that God is always just and righteous. Forbearance was too easily interpreted as indifference. But can God be just if he is apathetic toward sin?

When it appears that sin is treated as inconsequential, as was the case in the centuries preceding Christ's advent, the glory of God is treated as inconsequential. When God passes over sin, it looks as though he is agreeing that his glory is of little value. And that is precisely what it *appears* God has done by acquitting and justifying sinners, like you and me.

Before I explain what Paul means in vv. 25-26, we need to address another issue that is at the heart of why a passage like this is so often misunderstood.

One of the biggest problems we face that serves as an obstacle to our making sense of what Paul says here, is that even Christians too often think like the world does. We think that we human beings are the primary reason for the existence of the universe. We are at the center of all things. Everything revolves around us, to preserve our rights and to make us happy.

The biblical mindset, the biblical worldview, begins with God. He is the most important being of all. He is the beginning and end of all things, not you and me. He is the center of all reality. The universe and everything in it exists by his creative power and is designed to glorify him, not you and me. The result is that often times what is a problem for humans is not a problem at all. If you are looking at the world and interpreting events with man as the center, as if he and his rights were the center of all things, you might see a problem here and there. That is the worldly, natural, human mindset. But if you begin with God and his glory as the center of all things, what you first thought was a problem no longer is.

Here's why I'm saying all this. ***What is the most serious problem that the death of Jesus was designed to solve? Or again, what is the first and most vital reason why Jesus came to die?*** The human, worldly mindset will answer that question one way, while the biblical mindset will answer it yet another way. The human, worldly, secular mindset will say: "Jesus came to die primarily to deliver us from sin and death." The biblical mindset will say: "Jesus came to die primarily to demonstrate the righteousness of God and to vindicate his holiness and glorify his good name."

The way that God had governed the world from the fall of Adam to the birth of Christ made it look like God was unrighteous and unaffected by sin and moral evil. For centuries it appeared that God had been doing what Psalm 103:10 says he does: "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." He responds to sins and iniquities with forbearance and patience and seems just to pass over them.

I already mentioned how we see this in the life of King David. He committed adultery with Bathsheba. He was complicit in the murder of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. Nathan the prophet confronts David about his sin. David confesses his sin. And although God brings severe discipline on David and discord to the nation of Israel, Nathan says to him, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam. 12:13). Wait a minute! He committed adultery and arranged for Bathsheba's husband to be killed. And God says, "You shall not die"?

Think about it this way. When the Lord spoke to David about his sin he said: “you have despised *me*” (2 Sam. 12:10). So when God chooses not to take David’s life, he makes it look like he’s not worth much. God obviously isn’t all that glorious, or David would have suffered far worse than he did. If sinning against God doesn’t call for serious consequences, it must mean that God is cheap and not deserving of much consideration. Despising God, as David did, ends up looking like a minor offense, which means that God is of comparatively little importance. When God passes over sin it appears as if he agrees with those who despise his name and belittle his glory. He seems to be saying it is a matter of indifference that his glory is spurned. In passing over sin God seems to condone and approve of the low assessment of his worth.

Go back with me to November, 1963, when Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy. If Oswald would have been able to stand trial for his crime, and was found guilty, what response would there be if he was sentenced to only 6 months in prison and fined \$1,000? Most everyone would have concluded that the President’s life wasn’t worth much. The dignity of the office of President of the United States would suffer reproach.

In a way, this is what God’s forbearance in passing over sins during the time of the old covenant looks like. God would be perceived by the world as weak and worthless and his glory of no value if sinning against him was so conveniently ignored. So, in order to make known his greatness and the majesty of his holiness, God sent his Son to pay the price for sins committed and thereby vindicated and demonstrated the immeasurable worth of his glory. Paul intends for us to see in the death of Christ, first and foremost, a declaration and demonstration of the unfathomable worth and infinite value of God. God is committed above all else to uphold and make known the glory of his name.

Just and Justifier (v. 26)

So let me be clear. There appears on the surface to be a miscarriage of justice in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Proverbs 17:15 we read that “he who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.” But if the gospel is that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5) and acquits the guilty, how does he escape this denunciation?

Think about the two-fold challenge that God faces. In the first place, he is committed to proving to everyone that he is in fact just, righteous, and holy. But secondly, he also desires to justify sinful men and women like you and me. ***How can he do both?*** How can he declare as righteous people like us who have belittled him and disregarded him and, like David, despised him? How can he be “the justifier” of fallen and rebellious people and at the same time be seen as just and righteous himself?

This is the problem God faces when he justifies us. We are guilty of crimes against God and his glory. We have despised him. We have put in his place dumb idols. But then God turns around and lets us go completely free. He declares that not only are we innocent but that we are also righteous! He justifies us! How can he do that? How can he be, as Paul says, both *“just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”*?

It seems as if should he justify us, he can't be just. After all, we deserve eternal death. And if he's just, he can't justify us! How can a just and righteous God declare righteous those who are by nature and choice unrighteous? That's the dilemma. And the solution is found in the death of Jesus as our substitute.

The just God requires the maximum punishment for those who have despised him. That's us. And Jesus endures that punishment. He satisfies the demands of justice. He quenches the wrath of God. And on that basis God is free to impute the righteousness of Jesus to us and declare us justified when we put our faith in him. Later, in Romans 4:5, Paul describes God as the one “who justifies the ungodly.” But that sounds like an extremely unrighteous thing to do. How can you declare as “godly” those who are “ungodly”? You can do it because a righteous substitute, Jesus, has lived the sinless life they should have lived and didn't, and has now died the sacrificial death they should have died but now don't have to.

This is why that word we looked at last week, “propitiation,” is so precious and vital to our eternal welfare. Out of his love for the glory of God, and also because of his love for you and me, Jesus absorbed in himself and extinguished the flame of God's wrath that we deserved to endure. In doing so he made it clear that the righteous God is truly righteous. He does take sin seriously. His glory is of such a magnitude that violation of it calls for the maximum penalty. But it also makes clear how God can then justify the ungodly. He can declare righteous the unrighteous because the righteousness of Christ has been transferred to them.

Simply put, when God set forth Jesus as a propitiatory sacrifice on the cross he was, as it were, answering his critics. The death of Christ was not only a substitutionary sacrifice for sinners; it was also the public vindication of the justice and righteousness of God himself. God **is** just; God **is** righteous; the wages of sin **is** death; the undeniable public proof of which is the propitiatory suffering of Jesus.

We are not now spiritually and morally naked before God. We are not like the Emperor parading in the streets of his kingdom. We are clothed in the gloriously righteousness robes of Jesus himself.

God's Pursuit of His Glory is the Most Loving Thing He Could Ever Do!

Does it seem odd to you that the ultimate motivation in the heart of God in sending his Son to die was his own glory and the vindication of his own reputation as just? I realize that our initial and instinctive

response is to say, Yes, that sounds profoundly selfish and unloving of God. But I contend that it was in point of fact the single most loving thing that God could ever do for you and me. Let me explain why in three easy steps.

First, if God is going to love us, he must give us the greatest and most glorious and most satisfying gift possible. And what is that gift? That gift is himself. Surely you will agree that there is no more beautiful or more majestic or more satisfying Being in the universe than God. He is more deserving of honor and praise and adoration than anything and everything in the universe. There is therefore no greater gift that he could give us than himself to see and enjoy and love. I don't think anyone will disagree with that.

Second, what then would become of God if he failed to pursue and uphold his own glory? There is no tragedy should you and I fail to pursue and uphold our own personal glory, for the simple fact that we are not God! We are fallen human beings. But if God failed to pursue and uphold his own glory, he would be guilty of committing the most heinous and horrific sin possible. He would be guilty of violating the First Commandment. Because God is God, because as God he is deserving of the highest praise and honor, he must seek the demonstration and vindication of his own personal honor. For him to fail to do that, for him to devote more energy to anything or anyone else, would mean that he is an idolater and thus isn't God after all. And if that were true, we stand to lose everything.

Third, to love us supremely, God must not only give us himself but also awaken in us the incomparable, unfathomable joy and satisfaction of knowing him and worshiping him. He must display his greatness and beauty and work in our hearts to awaken in us delight and joy and satisfaction in him. No one has stated this with as much clarity as John Piper:

“God is central and supreme in his own affections. There are no rivals for the supremacy of God's glory in his own heart. God is not an idolater. He does not disobey the first and greatest commandment. With all his heart and soul and strength and mind, he delights in the glory of his manifold perfections. The most passionate heart for God in all the universe is God's heart. He takes infinite delight in the glory of his name and the greatness of his fame” (John Piper).

This is why I claimed in the title to this message that **God's Demonstration of His Glory and Justice is the Most Loving Thing He Could Do**. For God to seek his own glory, for God to labor to demonstrate and vindicate his own name is the most loving thing he can do for us. *God is the one Being in the universe for whom self-seeking is the consummate act of love for others.*

How Faith Excludes Boasting (vv. 27-31)

The word “then” with which v. 27 begins should probably be translated, “therefore.” In other words, what conclusion should we draw from what Paul has just been saying?

The good news for you and me is that all this has made it possible for God to remain perfectly just at the same time he justifies sinners. Unlike the Emperor in Hans Christian Anderson’s fable, God can clothe us in the righteous garments of his Son, for real! And the way you and I lay hold of this righteousness is by faith. This is Paul’s primary point in vv. 27-31.

Can anyone here boast or brag that they are believers in Jesus? No, and for two reasons. First, it is the essence of faith that it looks away from itself to its gracious object. The second that faith takes its eyes off of Jesus and examines itself and its own quality, it ceases to be faith. Faith, by definition, is the self-denying determination to look to and praise the object of its trust. As soon as faith compliments itself, it ceases to be faith and becomes a work.

The second reason faith excludes boasting is that saving faith is itself a gift from God. We see this in such texts as Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; and 2 Peter 1:1. The reason faith cannot boast about itself is that ultimately the only reason we have faith is because God freely and graciously gave it to us!

So, Paul’s point here is that all boasting is excluded because of the way God saves us. In other words, what excludes boasting from salvation is that justification comes to us not by works of Law, but by faith which the Law teaches.

This is why God can justify both Jews and Gentiles. **“God is one,”** says Paul in v. 30. By this I think he means both that there is only one God, not many, and that the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is unified in his character and in his purposes. There is therefore only one way to be put right with God. God does not have two ways of salvation, one for Jews and one for Gentiles. Whether you are Jewish and have received the mark of circumcision in your flesh or you are a Gentile and have not, God will declare both to be righteous through faith in Jesus. There are not many differing ways of getting right with God. There is only one way to get right with the one God: faith in Jesus Christ!

Now, someone, especially those who are Jewish, might wonder at this point if what Paul has said utterly undermines and overthrows the law of God. If I can’t be justified by obeying the law, of what good is the law? They think Paul has in effect nullified the law, rendering it useless.

Far from it, says Paul. In fact, it is faith in Jesus Christ that enable us to “uphold the law” (v. 31). How so? In what sense is the law established or upheld (v. 31).

- In one sense the OT Scriptures testify to justification being by faith alone.
- It is also true that the law convicts us of sin and awakens us to our need for justification by faith alone.
- It is also the case that our faith fulfills the law because it is fulfilled in Christ in whom we believe.
- But most important of all, and this is what I think Paul primarily had in mind, is that those who have faith in Christ will in fact keep (fulfill) the law. I.e., the moral norms of the law still function as authoritative for the believer and saving faith is the kind of faith that works or obeys. If we pursue and practice God’s moral law by faith, knowing that we are not justified by obedience but that we obey because we are already justified, our faith upholds and honors the law of God.

Conclusion

The world at large is very much like the foolish Emperor who fancies himself clothed in the most beautiful garment. And the Word of God speaks directly to everyone and says, “The Emperor has no clothes!” You have nothing to cover yourself as you stand exposed and accountable to God. Your only hope is to let God adorn you in the righteous robes of his Son when you turn from self and repudiate your reliance on anything other than Jesus and his work on the cross for sinners.