

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	25		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE BIBLE'S GREATEST TEXT

John 3:16 is probably the best-known verse in the Bible. It surely is one of the most important. But like any other text of Scripture, it must be properly understood. After all, there is no shortage of interpretations of John 3:16 that distort its meaning (i.e., the various cults). If one wishes to understand the Biblical meaning of that great text, you must turn to Romans 3:21-26. Paul has challenged human pride with its peacock's feathers in chapters 1 and 2 of Romans. He has shown convincingly man's fatal disease of sin, sin original and total. And that which makes man so pitiful in his state is that he is for the most part blind to his sin. Too common is the view of the 17th century Dutch philosopher Spinoza, "Sin is the mere moonshine of an antediluvian Calvinism." In much that passes for evangelicalism today, we hear things like, "Let us confess our problem with human relational adjustment dynamics, and especially our feebleness in networking." Or, "I'd like to share that we just need to target holiness as a growth area." Where sin is concerned, people mumble now.¹ The point is that as fallen people, we tend to minimize our sins by calling them bad habits or faults or slips, mistakes, etc. As a result, we tend not to take sin seriously – and naturally we think God shouldn't either. But He does take sin seriously. Listen to the advice of old J. C. Ryle: "Sit down, and take pen and paper, and count up the sins that you have probably sinned since you first knew good from evil. Sit down, I say, and *make a sum*. Grant for a moment that there have been on an average 15 hours in every 24 during which you have been awake, and an active and accountable being. Grant for a moment that in each one of these 15 hours you have sinned only two sins. Surely you will not say that this is an unfair supposition. Remember we may sin against God in thought, word, or deed. I repeat, it cannot be thought an extreme thing to suppose that in each waking hour of your life you have, in thought, or word, or deed, sinned two sins. And now add up the sins of your life, and see to what sum they will amount."² Seeing the seriousness of our sin is the first step in understanding the wrath of God and, in turn, seeing the central importance of the cross of Christ. God's wrath is seen throughout the Bible. In the Garden of Eden, God judged the sin of Adam (Genesis 3:14-19). In the flood, God again acted in judgment on the sin of man (Genesis 6:5-17). God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness (Genesis 18:20-19:29). The Law pronounces a divine curse on all who transgress (Galatians 3:10). The book of Revelation is from beginning to end a record of God's wrath. Supremely, God's judgment and wrath against sin is depicted in the suffering of Christ's cross (Galatians 3:13; Romans 3:21-26). "We seldom conceive of the greatness of injuries, as they are in themselves committed; so we are apt to slight them; but we do measure them best by the anger and the wrath they beget in the party wronged (if he be not partial in his own cause), and by the furious expressions of his wrath returned back again upon the offense. So whilst we view sin in its direct and proper notion, and that it is an injury against the Great God, so we should never have seen the full vileness of it; for as God is in himself invisible, so is the evil of sin; and as Christ is the liveliest image of the invisible God, so are his debasement and his sufferings the truest glass to behold the ugliness of sin in, and the utmost representation to make us sensible of it. The throwing down the angels out of heaven, the cursing the earth and all Adam's posterity for

Adam's sin, the drowning the old world, the overturning Sodom, and the fire unquenchable which burns to the bottom of hell; these were such considerations as make us stand amazed and cry out, Oh, what is sin, that thou dost so remember it, or the sinfulness of it, that thou dost punish it in the destruction of the best creatures thy hands have made! But all these tragedies are but as lighter skirmishes, and but shows of justice and wrath, in comparison of the death and sufferings of his Son."³

When there is no recognition of sin, there is felt no need of the saving cross of Christ. The crucified Christ becomes unnecessary to the life of the church, and biblical gospel preaching is no longer heard. Job expressed the problem that the gospel is intended to solve in this way, "I know it is so of a truth; but how should man be just before God?" (9:2). Later on in his book, he wrote, "How then can man be justified with God? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?" (25:4). It is the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ that through the redemption accomplished by Him we may extol the wisdom and mercy of a God "that justifieth the ungodly" (cf. Rom. 4:5). The section of Romans to which we now turn gives the solution to Job's problem. It contains the normative passage on the great Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. Leon Morris has referred to this passage as "possibly the most important single paragraph ever written."⁴ Calvin declares "that there is not probably in the whole Bible a passage which sets forth more profoundly the righteousness of God in Christ."⁵

I. THE MANIFESTATION OF JUSTIFICATION

- A. *Its Relationships* (Rom. 3:21). The words "But now" (*nuni de*) are, according to A. T. Robertson, an emphatic logical transition.⁶ The words, then, make the turn in the argument. The righteousness of God, which in the theme verses was said to have been "revealed" (cf. 1:17), is now said to have been "manifested."
- B. That is the state of the plot in Romans at this point. The righteousness of God is said to be apart from the Law, and yet witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. In other words, the righteousness is not gained by legal effort or by the works of the Law. And yet at the same time, it is not contrary to the Law, for the Law did not teach that man gained life by good works. Rather, the Law brought by its demands, which man could not meet, the knowledge of sin (cf. 3:20). The Old Testament witnessed to the righteousness that was apart from legal works. It taught that righteousness came by the merits of a Redeemer who justified men by faith (cf. Gen. 15:6; Hab. 2:4; Psa. 32:1-2; Isa. 8:14; 28:16; 59:20-21, -- all these texts are used by Paul in Romans). The Old Testament sacrifices by a kind of Pavlovian conditioned reflex impressed upon the minds of the Israelites the fact that God was to be approached only on the ground of sacrifice, and that forgiveness was received only on the ground of the blood that was shed (cf. Heb. 9:22).
- C. *Its Rationale* (Rom. 3:22). Further explanation is given in this verse, Paul setting forth the rationale of the righteousness. It is a faith righteousness (cf. 1:17). It is given by the instrumentality of faith in Jesus Christ to all believers. That is necessary, namely, that it be through faith and not by works, because there is no difference in the sinnerhood of all men.
- D. *Its Reason* (Rom. 3:23). All men fail, for both Jews and Gentiles are sinners. This clear statement of universal sinfulness is basic to Paul's understanding of the human predicament and also of the salvation Christ brought. Were it not for our sin, there would have been no need for Christ's redemptive activity; because of our sin there is no possibility of our achieving salvation by our own efforts.⁷ The verb translated "come short" (*husterountai*) is in the present tense and is followed by the ablative case, the case of separation. Thus it conveys the idea of continued action, i.e., still falling short. Men have all sinned, and they are constantly coming short of the glory of God. But what is meant by "the glory of God?" Shedd refers the words to the "approbation of God."⁸ Others have suggested the image of God, or original and future glory.⁹ Paul, of course, does not say

that all come equally short of the standard. The standard is nothing less than perfection, and nothing less can pass. That means that the lack of an inch is as fatal as the lack of a foot. Thus, in the light of God's standard (cf. Matt. 5:20; 22:37), religion, culture, educations, good works, and religious ordinances cannot save. Man is lost; his mouth is "stopped" before the demands of a just and holy Sovereign. The preaching of biblical sin, wrath, condemnation, hell, and justification, regeneration, heaven, and glory has been neglected. These are the things the apostles talk about. They do not speak of "self-doubt," "self-worth," and "personality difficulties." In fact, modern psychology, although it may contain some genuine insights, is entirely too superficial in its major emphases to be called apostolic. Paul's necessary and inevitable note concerning man's state is that he is a sinner, under divine judgment. His fate is death (cf. 6:23).

II. THE DESCRIPTION OF JUSTIFICATION

- A. **The Manner, or Principle** (Rom. 3:24, "freely"). Two words demand definition, if we are to understand the apostle here. They are the words *to justify* and *propitiation*. The former word is often misunderstood, being given the force of *to make righteous* or *to be righteous*. In spite of able and learned attempts to make the word mean *to make righteous*,¹⁰ it must be given the forensic, or legal, sense of *to declare righteous* (cf. Deut. 25:1; 1 Kings 8:32; Isa. 5:23; Rom. 2:13; 3:4; 4:3-25 [notice the use of the word *to reckon* with *righteousness*]; 5:17, "the gift of righteousness").¹¹ Thus, we shall use it in the sense of to declare a believer righteous by virtue of the imputation of the merits of the crucified Savior, Jesus Christ. The other word, *propitiation*, may be loosely paraphrased by the word *satisfaction*. It may in this instance mean *mercy seat*, for it is doubtful that a Jew could fail to make the connection since the root was commonly used in the Old Testament for that part of the furniture of the tabernacle where the blood was sprinkled in the most holy place. Since the article is lacking from the word in Paul's usage here, the emphasis rests upon the *mercifulness* of the mercy seat. It, the cross, is a *mercy seat*. The apostle speaks of the manner, or principle, of justification in the use of the adverb, "*dorean, freely.*" It is rendered by the phrase, "without a cause," in John 15:25 and by "for nought" in 2 Thessalonians 3:8. It is clear that the word here underscores the grace that underlies God's dealings with man in justification. In fact, the words "by his grace" simply emphasize and explain the adverb "freely." In the words of Cranfield, they "support and confirm each other."¹² It is what Lenski calls "pure, abounding, astounding grace."¹³
- B. **The Method** (Rom. 3:24-25a). In the course of the exposition of the method of justification, Paul refers to the instrumentality of redemption. The word Paul uses is a beautiful, intensive word. He might have used the simple *lutrosis*, ransoming, but he used the *apolutrosis*, which means *a ransoming away*. In other words, as Deissmann points out, justification is not through the *ransoming*, but the *ransoming away*, which is in Christ Jesus. It suggests the fact that we shall never again come into the same slavery to sin.¹⁴ Cf. Lev. 16:22. To sum up the apostle's description of the method as it is presented here, we can say that the Father provided that which was the satisfaction of His holiness and justice in their claims against man. That satisfaction was secured by the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the mercy seat, and it was His blood that secured the redemption. There is no Cain-way of approach to God. Cf. Lev. 16:9, 15-19. Thus, it was the satisfaction of the divine holiness and its claims on man in judgment through the death of the Representative of His people that secured the redemption from the bondage of sin. It is clear that inherent in the doctrine of the atonement as set forth here is the affirmation of substitution, penal sacrifice, and divine propitiation.
- C. **The Means of Appropriation** (Rom. 3:25). The means of appropriation of the benefits of the death of Christ is through faith and faith alone. Some people mistakenly believe that it is their act of believing that saves them. Lloyd-Jones emphatically declares, "it does not. It

is the Lord Jesus Christ who saves you. If you say that your faith saves you, your faith has become a work, and you have something to boast of. You can say, 'I have believed, the other man has not, and I therefore deserve salvation and he does not.' You are saving yourself. That is the very thing the Apostle is denouncing. Faith does not save us; it is through faith we are saved. Faith is only the instrument; it is not the cause of my justification. The cause of my justification is the Lord Jesus Christ and all He has done, and I must never put anything, not even my faith, there."¹⁵

III. THE INTENTION OF JUSTIFICATION

- A. ***Righteousness for the Past*** (Rom. 3:25b). In a sense, we have the motive in the heart of God in the provision of righteousness. In the first place, there is a manifestation of God's righteousness in the past, "to declare his righteousness for the remission (lit. *passing over*) of sins that are past (*progegonoton*)." The pro- in *progegonoton* has reference not to sins committed before conversion or baptism, but before the new era of salvation. The book of Hebrews declares that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (9:22) and that the blood of bulls and goats could not atone for sin (10:4). "This does not mean that God failed to punish, or 'overlooked' sins committed before Christ; nor does it mean that God did not really forgive sins under the Old Covenant. Paul's meaning is rather that God postponed the full penalty (*paresis*) due sins in the Old Covenant, allowing sinners to stand before Him without their having provided an adequate satisfaction of the demands of His holy justice (cf. Heb. 10:4)."¹⁶
- B. ***Righteousness for the Present*** (Rom. 3:26a). He was also set forth for the manifestation of God's righteousness in the present season. In view of this, it is clear that *dikaioyne autou* must have reference to some aspect of God's character that might have been called into question because of His treating sins in the past with less than full severity, and that has now been demonstrated in setting forth Christ as the propitiatory.
- C. ***Righteousness for the Believer*** (Rom. 3:26b). The final intention of the Father is that He might be seen to be both just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus. The great problem, not of how to get men to God, but of how to get God to men, is solved – and righteously (cf. 5:21). In the cross of Christ, He is seen to be both light in His judgment and love in His mercy (cf. Psa. 85:10). God *has been* propitiated, and it no longer is necessary to coax, cajole, wheedle mercy from Him. God *is* propitious by reason of the death of Christ. Just believe Him and thank Him, receiving the gift of eternal life.

CONCLUSION: I have documented from time to time that the Reformation's understanding of justification by faith alone is under attack. N. T. Wright and those sympathetic to the so-called New Perspective on Paul contend that justification is not central to the gospel. Brian McLaren, the latest "expert" on church growth¹⁷ recently wrote that "bona fide evangelicals (such as Mark Baker, Joel Green,¹⁸ and N. T. Wright) are suggesting that the gospel is not atonement-centered, or, at least, not penal-substitutionary-atonement-centered . . . This suggestion represents a Copernican revolution for Western Christianity, in both its conservative Catholic and Protestant forms. It may be judged erroneous – and likely *will* be judged so by many readers of this paper – but even those who dismiss it would be wise to consider the possibility that there is at least some small grain of truth to these ruminations on the nature and center of the gospel. A lot is at stake either way . . . For reasons I have detailed elsewhere, I have put my eggs in the basket that suggests we need to rethink our understanding of the gospel – both for the sake of faithfulness to Holy Scripture and for the sake of mission in the emerging post-modern culture."¹⁹ The gospel according to McLaren has as its primary focus the Kingdom of God on earth and as such has a sociopolitical agenda. Forgiveness of sins is likewise construed socially and racially. Was justification a pivotal doctrine in the Apostle's theology? How did Paul understand the gospel? Note how the doctrine of justification is directly linked with the Cross of Christ in Rom. 3:21-26. The two themes (justification and penal

substitution) are interlocked. Note also the Apostle's emphasis elsewhere, "I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Earlier in this same letter he declares, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), and with a similar sweep, he tells the Galatian Christians, capturing much of the substance of his letter to them, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). For Paul, the gospel was centered in the Cross of Christ – and the atonement is a penal substitution – and our justification is directly connected with Christ's active and passive obedience. In other words, this is the sum and substance of the gospel. In their misguided attempt to make the gospel more attractive to unbelievers, these people end up with no gospel at all – in fact, what they have is "another" gospel, and that, in the assessment of the Apostle Paul, is anathema (Gal. 1:9).

ENDNOTES

¹C. Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995), p. X.

²J. C. Ryle, *Old Paths: Being Plain Statements on Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity* (rpt. James Clark, 1972), p. 153.

³*The Works of Thomas Goodwin* V, p. 287.

⁴L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP, 1984), p. 173.

⁵*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* VIII (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 75.

⁶A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament* IV (Broadman, 1931), p. 346.

⁷L. Morris, *The Epistle to The Romans* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 177.

⁸W. G. T. Shedd, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1977), p. 77.

⁹C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans* (T & T Clark, 1975), p. 204.

¹⁰C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on The Epistle to The Romans* (Harper, 1967), p. 75.

¹¹Cf. David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 155-62. J. R. W. Stott has a good discussion in his popular commentary *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994). "To justify," he writes, "is to declare or pronounce righteous, not to make righteous. This was the nub of the sixteenth-century debate over justification. The Roman Catholic view, as expressed at the Council of Trent (1545-64), was that justification takes place at baptism, and that the baptized person is not only cleaned from sins but simultaneously infused with a new, supernatural righteousness. One can understand the motive which led to this insistence. It was the fear that a mere declaration of righteousness would leave the person concerned unrenewed and unrighteous, and might even encourage persistence in sinning (antinomianism). This was, of course, the precise criticism which was leveled at Paul (6:1, 15). It led him to expostulate in the most vigorous manner that baptized Christians have both died to sin (so that they cannot possibly live in it any longer) and risen to a new life in Christ. Put a little differently, justification (a new status) and regeneration (a new heart), although not identical, are simultaneous. Every justified believer has also been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and so put on the road to progressive holiness. To quote Calvin, 'no one can put on the righteousness of Christ without regeneration.' Again, 'the apostle maintains that those who imagine that Christ bestows free justification upon us without imparting newness of life shamefully rend Christ asunder.' An important fresh turn in this Roman Catholic-Protestant debate was taken by Professor Hans Kung in 1957, when his dialogue with Karl Barth entitled *Justification* was published. He agreed both that justification is a divine declaration and that we are justified by faith alone. But he also insisted that God's words are always efficacious, so that whatever he pronounces comes immediately into being. Therefore, when God says to somebody, 'You are just,' 'the sinner is just, really and truly, outwardly and inwardly, wholly and completely . . . In brief, God's declaration of justice is . . . at the same time and in the same act a *making just*.' Thus justification is 'the single act which simultaneously declares just and makes just.' There is a dangerous ambiguity here, however. What does Hans Kung mean by 'just?' If he means *legally* just, put right with God, then indeed we become immediately what God declares us to be. But if he means *morally* just, renewed, holy, then God's declaration does not immediately secure this, but only initiates it. For this is not justification but sanctification, which is a continuous lifelong process" (p. 112).

¹²Cranfield, p. 206.

¹³R. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to The Romans* (Augsburg, 1936), p. 251.

¹⁴Adolph Deissmann, *Light From the Ancient East* (Doran, 1922), p. 327. The idea is traceable to Chrysostom through R. C. Trench, from whom Deissmann got his idea.

¹⁵M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Ch. 3:20-4:25: Atonement and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 47.

¹⁶D. Moo, *Romans 1-8: The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary* (Moody, 1991), p. 241.

¹⁷Christianity Today (Nov. 2004) devoted its cover story to Brian McLaren and the “emerging church movement.” All of the catchphrases of church growth are used, “cultural relevance,” “cultural adaptation,” “culturally savvy.” The only way to be effective is to adopt not only a post-modern vocabulary but a post-modern perspective as well. “Pastors,” the article tells us, “who would have a hard time seeing the relevance of post-modernism could suddenly envision it as the key to finding (Brian McLaren’s Book, *A New Kind of Christian*) spiritual renewal for those who thought they had given up on church” (p. 39).

¹⁸Baker and Green authored the book *Recovering The Scandal of The Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (IVP, 2000), in which they categorically reject any notion of the atonement being a penal substitution. They are guilty of marginalizing sin as individual acts of disobedience (pp. 54, 95, 201-2) and speak of God’s wrath merely in terms of his “handing people over to experience the consequences of the sin they choose” (p. 54). They conveniently neglect to even mention texts like Eph. 5:3-6 and 1 Thess. 5:2-3, 9!

¹⁹B. McLaren, “A Radical Rethinking of Our Evangelistic Strategy,” *Theology News & Notes* (Fuller Theological Seminary, Fall 2004), p. 5.