



## Justification: through Christ alone

### Romans 3:9-31

By Thomas L. Trevethan

*We believe in justification by God's grace to all who repent and put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.*

How do people today answer the question, "What is most fundamentally wrong with our society and its human citizens?" This Bible study will challenge your perspective on core problems in our world. This Scripture passage captures and deepens the foundational gospel truth that God in grace forgives believing and repentant sinners.

1. Read [Romans 3:9-31](#) aloud, using three people to read vv. 9-20, vv. 21-26, and vv. 27-31. What words and ideas are repeated throughout the whole passage? What does this tell you about the central theme of the passage?
2. **Romans 3:10-18** is a collection of statements from the Old Testament. What is the common theme?
  - What do we learn about the human condition from these verses? (This is a summary of the case that Paul is making in Romans 1-3).
  - Notice the poetic imagery used here. What truths do you learn about people's speech, treatment of others, and relationship to God?
  - Do you think that this summary is too harsh or unfair? Why?
3. Look at **Romans 3:19-20**. How does "the law" (that is, God's commandments revealed to Israel in the Old Testament) come into this picture? What is the value and limitation of the law?
4. **Review Romans 3:9-20**. How would you summarize this discussion so far?
5. If you asked the apostle Paul "What's wrong with the world," what do you suppose he would say, given what you have seen in this paragraph? How does it compare to what most people in our society might say?
6. **Romans 3:21-26** is a tight, densely structured paragraph. This makes it challenging to understand. It will take some hard work to grasp the meaning, but also offers great rewards for our understanding of the gospel. One commentator described it as "simply the most important paragraph ever written." Read it aloud and notice repeated words or ideas.
  - What other words can you find which are important to the meaning of our salvation?
  - How would you define each of these words? Use a dictionary or, better, a Bible dictionary if definitions are unclear to you.

7. The thematic word in this paragraph is “righteousness/ justify/ justice.” All three of these words come from a common Greek root, so their repetition is even more pronounced in the original language of the passage.

- Look through vv. 21-26 and make a list of all the truths you can see about the righteousness of God of which Paul speaks.
- Verse 21 begins with “*But . . .*” How does this righteousness stand in contrast to the righteousness discussed in vv. 19-20?
- How is it that God demonstrates his justice by his free gift of righteousness through Jesus’ redemption and atoning sacrifice (vv. 25-26)?
- Why is it important that in “acquitting guilty sinners” God was acting justly by the standard of his own person and promises?
- Can you suggest a preliminary definition for “justified” from these verses?

8. Here is a historically important definition of *justification* of great simplicity and power:

**Justification** is defined as “*an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, and received by faith alone.*” ([Westminster Shorter Catechism](#), Q. 33)

- How does this definition arise from Romans 3:9-26?
- Paul never uses the word “alone.” What is there in these verses and their logic that leads you to think that “alone” is fully appropriate in this case?

### MAKING IT PERSONAL

- Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ, trusting only in the grace of God that comes through him for your acceptance with God?
  - If so, the most basic response would be to offer thanks to the God of justifying grace. Your prayer might be “*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*”
  - If not, what keeps you from doing so right now? Your prayer might be “*God be merciful to me, a sinner, only because of Jesus.*”
- In the final section of **Romans 3:27-31**, what are some practical implications of this doctrine of justification that Paul expresses?
- Why are these implications foundationally important to a mature spiritual life and vibrant mission to the campus?
- How might God’s perspective of the human problem guide your response to issues of injustice and corruption in the world? What is the underlying problem behind such issues as human trafficking, racism, and world hunger? How does this relate to possible solutions?
- What can you learn about the priorities of your mission to the campus from this study?

## GOING DEEPER

- The *righteousness of God* refers to the character of God as the one who will always do what is fully right by the standard of his own person and promise, or to the acts of God which establish what is right, what is fully in accord with his person and promises, or to the state of those who have been put right by his right-making activity. The Righteous God is fully and gloriously himself in both his acts of mercy and his acts of justice and judgment.
- *To justify* is “to declare righteous” or “to acquit,” as in a verdict pronounced by a judge. *To justify*, then, means “to acquit a person and declare that person in right standing” or “to acquit a person and declare that person in right standing with the court,” according to this technical legal usage.
- *Justification* is the noun form of “justify,” the declaration that a person is not guilty and therefore is “in the right.”

## MORE SCRIPTURE STUDY

- Take a look at [Luke 18:9-14](#) for an illustration by Jesus on the core gospel truth that *God in grace forgives believing and repentant sinners*.
- [James 2:14-24](#) is another powerful passage about justification. As you read it, note the points of tension with Romans 3:9-31. How do you feel about the tension? How might you begin to bring these points of tension into greater harmony? For help, check the resources below.
- Learn more about justification with these Scripture passages: [Romans 4](#), [Romans 5:8-11](#), [Galatians 2:16-21](#), [Galatians 3:6-14](#).

## TOOLS FOR FURTHER GROWTH

- Listen to a four-part [audio series on justification](#) by Mike Reeves at [Theology Network](#).
- [“Does Justification Still Matter?”](#), an article by Michael S. Horton at [Modern Reformation](#).
- [The Promise of Peace: A Unified Theory of the Atonement](#) by Alan Spence, T & T Clark, 2007.