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GOD THE JUST AND THE JUSTIFIER

Romans 3:25-26

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Romans Lesson 18

God the Just and the Justifier
Romans 3:25-26

Jonathan Edwards preached a powerful sermon on the phrase in Romans 3:19, "that every mouth may be stopped," titled, "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners." He forcefully shows since God is infinitely lovely and holy, to sin against Him is an infinitely heinous crime, deserving infinite punishment. Thus God is just to punish sinners with eternal punishment.

As far as I know, Edwards did *not* follow up that sermon with another on Romans 3:25-26 on, "The Justice of God in the *Salvation* of Sinners." But that is the question that Paul answers in our text: How can a holy God be just and yet justify sinners? How can He forgive our sins and still be a God of justice?

Admittedly, that question probably doesn't keep you awake at night! Probably, you've never been asked that question when you shared Christ with someone. It's more likely that you've been asked, "Why can't God just forgive everyone? When someone offends me, I just forgive him. So why can't God do that? Why did Jesus have to shed His blood?"

The answer to those questions is, "You can forgive like that because God is absolutely holy and you're not. God must maintain His absolute justice by punishing all sin. An unjust 'God' would not be God at all." There's the rub: If God must punish all sin to maintain His absolute justice, then how can He forgive sinners? If a human judge started "showing love" by pardoning murderers and terrorists and rapists, we'd say, "Wait a minute! This is horrible! He's not upholding justice." So the question that Paul is grappling with here is, "How can a holy God be just if He pardons guilty sinners?" How can He be a God of love who shows mercy and yet be a righteous God of justice? His answer is:

Jesus' sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath and displays His justice in justifying sinners who have faith in Jesus.

As with our text last week, this week's text is simple on one level and yet difficult and deep on another level. The easy-to-

understand message is: When He died on the cross Jesus bore the penalty for sin for all who will trust in Him. Thus if I trust in Him, God can justly forgive my sin.

But, as with last week's text, there are some difficult theological terms here that have generated thousands of pages of commentary and debate among scholars—propitiation; blood; righteousness; justify; and faith. We need to understand these terms and the flow of thought to apply this Scripture correctly. And, it's a vital Scripture to apply properly, since it deals with our eternal destiny! And, of course, because it is such a vital text on a vital topic, the enemy has been relentless in attacking its truth. There are several current attacks on the doctrine of the atonement.

1. Jesus' sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath against us.
 - A. The basic meaning of *propitiation* is to satisfy God's wrath against our sin.

Propitiation is not a word that we use in common conversation. It comes from the ancient religious world, where people offered sacrifices to appease the anger of the gods. Because of that imagery, some liberal scholars have tried to eliminate the idea of God's anger by changing the word to *expiation*, which refers to the removal of guilt. But Leon Morris (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* [Eerdmans, third ed.], pp. 144-213) and other scholars have shown that the idea of satisfying God's wrath against sin is inherent in *propitiation*. Paul is saying here that Christ's sacrificial death is the means by which God's just wrath is turned away from sinners.

But we need to understand several things that distinguish biblical propitiation from the pagan expressions of it. In pagan religions, the person who is experiencing some difficulty assumes that he has offended the gods in some way, but he often doesn't know how. The gods are unpredictable, but something apparently got them upset! And, he's not quite sure which sacrifice will work to calm down the gods so that he or his family can get relief from their troubles. But the shamans have more experience with these sorts of things. So the troubled man pays them their fee, offers the prescribed sacrifice, and hopes that the deities will be happy for a while. His sacrifice is an attempt to propitiate the gods.

But biblical propitiation is much different. In the first place, God's wrath against sin is not capricious or mysterious. Rather, it is His settled holy opposition to evil, expressed in both temporal and eternal judgments. We see the temporal consequences of God's wrath in both the Old and New Testaments. God cast Adam and Eve out of the garden and pronounced curses on them, on the earth, and on the serpent because of their sin. He sent the flood to destroy everyone on earth in the days of Noah. He rained fire and brimstone on the decadent people of Sodom and Gomorrah. However you interpret the Book of Revelation, it's clear that God's temporal judgments were not limited to the Old Testament. He pours out His wrath on rebellious people right up to the time of Christ's return. That same book shows what Jesus often taught, that God's temporal wrath will turn into horrible, eternal wrath at the final judgment.

We've already seen the concept of God's wrath in Romans. In 1:18, Paul wrote, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." We saw that a large part of God's presently revealed wrath against sin is to let us suffer the consequences of sin, as described in 1:24-32. In 2:5, Paul refers to God's wrath as it pertains to eternal judgment: "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." Again in 3:5, he mentions "the God who inflicts wrath." So the concept of propitiation as the satisfying of God's wrath is not foreign to the Bible or to Romans.

But there is another major difference between the pagan concept of pacifying the anger of the gods and the biblical concept of propitiation. In the pagan religions, people take the initiative by offering sacrifices in an attempt to placate the gods. But in the Bible, God takes the initiative by providing the specific means of averting His wrath on sin. First, God always spells out what sin is, so that no one should accidentally do something to make God angry. He warned Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and He spelled out the consequences that would follow if they disobeyed: they would die. The same is true in the Law of Moses. God spells out what Israel should do or not do, along with the consequences for disobedience.

Also, in mercy God provides the way to satisfy His wrath and be reconciled to Him. He slaughtered an animal and provided their skins to clothe Adam and Eve. He told Noah to build the ark to preserve his family and him from the flood. He provided the ram, so that Abraham did not have to sacrifice Isaac. He gave detailed instructions to Moses about the sacrificial system. And, finally and supremely, by sending His own Son to die in our place on the cross, God satisfied His own wrath against our sin. Jesus paid the debt that we owed, so that God can show His grace and love to all that trust in Jesus Christ.

Paul makes this clear by the phrase, “whom God displayed publicly.” Other versions read, “set forth” (New KJV), “presented” (NIV, Holman CSB), and “put forward” (ESV). The verb that Paul uses can also mean to purpose or plan beforehand (Rom. 1:13; Eph. 1:9; the noun is used in Rom. 8:28; 9:11; Eph. 1:11; 3:11) and some scholars argue for that meaning here. It would then mean that God planned beforehand to provide Jesus as the propitiation for our sins. But it also can mean to display or set forth publicly. In this view, God’s setting forth or displaying Jesus as a propitiation would refer to His public death on the cross or to the apostolic preaching of the cross. Whichever view is correct, they both point to the fact that God took the initiative in providing the sacrifice that we need to satisfy His wrath.

Evangelical scholars debate one other thing about the Greek word that is translated *propitiation*. Some (Morris, Godet, and Lloyd-Jones) argue that it should be translated *propitiation* or *propitiatory sacrifice*. But others (Thomas Schreiner, Douglas Moo, and James Boice) point out that this word was used many times in the Old Testament to refer to the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies, where the high priest sprinkled the blood of atonement once a year. While perhaps we should not translate the word as *mercy seat*, it is easy to think that Paul could have had this in mind when he used the word here. The mercy seat was the place where atonement took place. God’s wrath was averted by the sprinkling of the blood of an innocent substitute on that mercy seat. While that yearly ritual was hidden from public view, it pointed ahead to Jesus, whom God publicly displayed (the veil is torn) as the final and complete sacrifice for our sins.

B. Christ's blood is the means by which God's wrath is propitiated or satisfied.

Again, liberals do not like the emphasis on Christ's blood as the means of propitiation. This seems crude and primitive. We may wonder why the New Testament puts such an emphasis on Christ's blood. Why doesn't it just refer to His death, which is clearly what His blood symbolizes (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [IVP], p. 180, citing Alan Stibbs' *Meaning of the Word 'Blood' in Scripture*)? Why does Paul say that God displayed Christ as "a propitiation *in His blood*"? He did so to connect what Christ did with the Old Testament sacrificial system (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Atonement and Justification* [Zondervan], p. 83).

But why did God require blood sacrifices in the Old Testament? The Lord explains to Moses (Lev. 17:11), "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." God told Adam and Eve that the punishment for their sins was death. This referred both to physical death and to spiritual death, or separation from God. When God killed an animal, perhaps a lamb, and clothed them with its skin, He was indicating that the way of reconciliation with Him was through shedding the blood of an acceptable substitute.

In the Old Testament sacrificial system, God provided a temporary way for sinners to have their sins atoned for so that they could be reconciled to Him. He required that they kill a male first-born lamb or goat without blemish and use its blood as the propitiation or atoning sacrifice for their sins. It pictured the substitutionary death of the victim in place of the sinner. It pointed ahead to Jesus, the Lamb of God, the ultimate and all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. Thus Jesus, just before going to the cross, as He celebrated the Passover with His disciples, took the cup and said (1 Cor. 11:25), "This cup is the new covenant in My blood."

So Paul's point when he says that God publicly displayed Christ "as a propitiation in His blood," is that Jesus' sacrificial death satisfied God's wrath against sin. All of this is foundational to understand the issue that Paul goes on to address: How can God be just when He forgives our sins?

2. Jesus' sacrificial death displays God's justice in passing over sins before the cross and in justifying sinners after the cross who have faith in Jesus.

A. Jesus' sacrificial death displays God's justice in patiently passing over the sins committed before the cross (3:25b).

"This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed." Paul is answering the charge that if atonement and forgiveness come only through Christ's death on the cross, then God was either unjust or terribly sloppy about sin to let go all of the sins committed before the cross. As Hebrews (9:9; 10:1-4) makes clear, those Old Testament sacrifices of animals could never make perfect or cleanse the consciences of the worshipers who offered them. The fact that people in the Old Testament era could be forgiven without the full satisfaction of Christ's death implies that God is unjust or not righteous.

But Paul, like the author of Hebrews, argues that God's forbearance in passing over sins in that era did not undermine His righteousness because that sacrificial system would find its fulfillment in the death of Jesus. Douglas Moo explains (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 240)

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 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).

It's as if the Old Testament saints who offered animal sacrifices in obedience to the Law were in heaven on credit. The payment of the bill was promised, but it had not yet been paid. Hebrews 9:15 explains, "For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." God's righteousness in passing over the sins of those

before Christ was vindicated because Jesus paid the debt in full for those sins when He died. He made full atonement.

- B. Jesus' sacrificial death displays God's justice after the cross when He justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (3:26).

Verse 25 deals with the question of God's justice in justifying sinners *before* the cross. Verse 26 focuses on His justice in justifying sinners *after* the cross: "for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." As we saw last week, to justify is to declare the accused to be righteous. But if the accused is actually guilty and the judge declares him to be righteous, isn't the judge unjust?

Paul answers, "No, the cross where Jesus shed His blood to satisfy God's wrath against our sin actually displays God's righteousness." Here *righteousness* does not refer to God's declaring sinners righteous (as it does in 3:21-22), but rather to God's justice. The death of Jesus demonstrates that justice has been served. God didn't just shrug off our sin. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Jesus, who was innocent of all sin, paid the penalty that we deserved. He bore the awful wrath of God when He cried out on the cross (Matt. 27:46), "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

On the cross, God's justice was satisfied so that His mercy could flow to every sinner who trusts in Jesus. The propitiation that God set forth in Jesus' blood means that "He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Paul uses the name *Jesus* alone to emphasize His identification with us as a man. Because He was fully human, His death may be applied to the sins of humans. Because He is the eternal Son of God, His death has infinite merit. Jesus' death vindicates God against any charge of injustice or unrighteousness.

But, note carefully that the benefits of Jesus' death do not apply to everyone. God only justifies "the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). Paul emphasizes *faith* in verses 21-31. It's in verses 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30 (twice), and 31, plus *believe* is in verse 22. Faith is not a work on our part that contributes toward our salvation. It is a gift from God and not something that we originate, or we would boast

in our faith (Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29). Faith is the hand that receives the gift of justification that God provides through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

Some versions (in 3:25) read, "faith in His blood." We put our faith in His blood in the sense that we trust in His death on the cross as our only means of being right with God. But technically, we trust in Jesus Himself. We trust the biblical witness concerning who He is. We trust the apostolic witness about the significance of His death in our place. It is the faith that realizes, "I'm spiritually terminal and I can't heal myself. But Jesus can. His death paid the awful penalty that my sin deserves. Abandoning all efforts to save myself by my own good deeds, I cast myself totally upon Jesus and His shed blood."

So thankfully, God is "the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." But don't miss that He also is *just*. If you do not have faith in Jesus, you will face God's inescapable justice brought against all your sins. Either Jesus met God's justice on your behalf, or you will face God's wrath on judgment day.

Conclusion

I conclude with some practical applications:

First, these verses show us that *God takes sin very seriously*. His grace does not mean that He is sloppy about sin. God does not just shrug and say, "Oh well, let's not worry about your sins. After all, everyone makes mistakes." No, His grace is grounded in His justice. God takes sin so seriously that He made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). Either you trust in Christ as your sin-bearer, or you'll face God's wrath throughout eternity.

Second, *because God takes sin so seriously, so should we*. It was our sin that put Jesus on the cross. That means that we should hate our sin and fight to kill it every day, especially on the thought level. C. H. Spurgeon said (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 53:225), "Shall I spare the sins, then, that nailed my Savior to the tree? O Christian, how you ought to hate the very thought of sin! We are very severe upon the sins of others, sometimes; how much more severe ought we to be upon our own!"

Finally, if Christ offered Himself as the satisfaction of God's wrath against sinners, then *any sinner can come to Him and find mercy*. William Cowper was an 18th century English poet who suffered greatly from depression. His mother died when he was six and he was sent to a boarding school where the older boys mercilessly bullied and beat him. In his late twenties, he tried to commit suicide and was finally admitted to an insane asylum. Cowper struggled with his guilt and often cried out, "My sin! My sin! Oh, for some fountain open for my cleansing!" The main doctor there was a committed Christian, who gently guided Cowper to the only fountain that can wash away our sin and guilt.

One day Cowper opened a Bible and saw Romans 3:24-25: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to manifest his righteousness." Cowper said, "Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone on me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the gospel." (I took this account from James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 371-372. For more, see John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* [Crossway], pp. 81-119).

Cowper struggled with severe depression for the rest of his life, but God used him to write many beloved hymns, including "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains."

Cowper's experience of knowing that his sins were forgiven the instant that he believed in the shed blood of Jesus can be your experience. Trust in Jesus and God's wrath is satisfied. He declares you not guilty both now and forever.

Application Questions

1. How would you answer the person who asked, "Why can't God just forgive everyone's sins? Why did Jesus have to die? Why do we have to believe in Him?"
2. Why is the concept of God's wrath against sin essential to the gospel? Why do we not hear more of it in supposedly evangelistic messages?
3. Some have argued that Old Testament saints were not truly forgiven. Why is this an error? What does Heb. 10:1-4 mean?
4. How would you explain to an unbeliever what it means to have faith in Jesus? What analogies can you use?

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