Understanding God’s Righteousness Based on an Exegetical Analysis of Romans 3:21-26

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**Introduction**

Like a prosecuting attorney, the Apostle Paul masterfully lays out his case for the total helplessness of mankind to attain righteousness on his own, or in keeping the Mosaic Law. From Romans 1:18- to 3:20 he demolishes any claims to works righteousness and proves that all men, Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin, and cannot attain righteousness by their own efforts. The case having been made that mankind is helpless to attain unto righteousness, Romans 3:21-26 is a welcome relief from that harsh reality. The author now changes his role from that of a prosecuting attorney to a defense attorney; with this distinction: he does not defend the case on the merits of the defendants’ worthiness. Instead, he bases his case on the righteousness of God, apart from the Law that is attained through faith in the finished work of Christ on the Cross.

The purpose of this exegetical paper on Romans 3:21-26 is to incorporate the various Greek language tools acquired in the course, *NGRK-505-Greek Language Tools*. This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive expose of this passage. Rather, it is designed to integrate the knowledge and skills gained throughout this course in explicating the truth of God’s Word in this passage. The overarching aim is for the student to demonstrate his knowledge of the various exegetical tools available that can be employed in explaining any New Testament Scripture for his own spiritual growth, as well as to enhance his effectiveness as a proclaimer of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Historical and Literary Context**

Throughout redemptive history mankind has proven himself time and time again to be incapable of attaining anything resembling God’s righteousness. Even Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and others, who seemed to have been righteous, at closer examination, it is clear that their righteousness was not a result of works, but by faith in God. It was Abraham’s faith in God that accredited righteousness to his account (Gen. 15:6, Romans 4:3, Gal. 3:6, James 2:22). These Old Testament characters who through their faith in God were accounted righteous provide towering examples for Christians living in the first Century. Paul will point out in this passage that the law and prophets were witnesses to God’s righteousness. It is within this historical context that the author of the epistle to the Romans takes on the theology of God’s righteousness.

The Apostle Paul had a two-fold purpose in mind for writing this epistle. (1) There seemed to have been some false rumors about Paul’s theology (3:8, 6:1-2, 15), and so he felt compelled to clarify the gospel he had been preaching, before he takes his long overdue journey into Rome and Spain. (2) There seemed to have been certain problems in the church at Rome respecting the Jews’ attitude toward Gentiles (2:1-29, 3:1, 9), and Gentiles’ toward Jews (11:11-36). His purpose was to convince those Christians at Rome of the correctness of the gospel that he was preaching. The literary genre of this epistle is protreptic in nature, which was common in the Greco-Roman world in which an author urges his audience to adopt a certain way of life. Thomas Tobin offers that in this literary genre the author wishing to convince his intended audience of a particular point does this by “setting out its advantages, replying to objections, and demonstrating its superiority.” This was evident throughout the epistle of Romans.
Analysis of Romans 3: 21-26

The Nature of God’s Righteousness (Rom. 3: 21-23).

It is clear from this passage that the concept of righteousness is vital. The NASB and the NIV refer to the righteousness of God in 3:21-22, and his righteousness in 3:25-26. In 3:21-22 the Greek word that the NASB and NIV render as righteousness, the GNT renders as “God's way of putting people right with himself;” and in verse 3:25 GNT states that God offered Jesus in order to “demonstrate that he is righteous;” and in 3:26 it states that God deals with sins in the present time to “demonstrate his righteousness.” The idea from all three translations is that the focus is on God’s righteousness, not man’s.

What does the term “righteousness of God” mean? Romans 3:21-26 mentions the Greek word δικαιοσύνη (dik-ah-yos-oo'-nay) four times which Netbible.com defines as “the state of him who is as he ought to be, righteousness, the condition acceptable to God, the doctrine concerning the way in which man may attain a state approved of God.” There is a related Greek word δικαιούμενοι (dik-ah-yo'-o) which this same source renders as justified, declared righteous, vindicated. There is still another related Greek word δίκαιον (dik'-ah-yos) in this passage which Netbible.org renders as “just, the righteous one, innocent, or a righteous person.” Finally, there is another Greek word δικαιοῦντα (dik-ah-yo'-o) which is translated “justifying” and which Netbible.org. renders, “is justified, is declared righteous, he justified, and is vindicated.” So seven times in this passage the idea of righteousness, or declared righteous, justify, justifier, vindicated is mentioned. Daniel Reid argues that the “noun “righteousness” (dikaiosynē), its related adjective (dikaios), and the verb “to justify,” “to pronounce/treat as righteous” or “put right” (dikaiō) are found in the Pauline writings over 100 times.” Edd Rowell states that “in Greek the righteousness family of words and the justification family have the same root (dikai-).” He further argues that justification, or being in right standing with God does not make sinners ethically righteous. Rather, it is making man right with God relationally. In other words, man is not inherently right with God. He states: “to justify is to acquit.” Verse 22 gives the basis on which this righteousness is attained; it is by or through faith. It reads: “even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.” The Greek word for faith used here is πίστεως (pis'-tis) which Netbible.com renders as “conviction of the truth of anything, belief; a conviction or belief respecting man's relationship to God and divine things.” So then, the righteousness of God as used here in this passage carries the idea of one who stands before God in a righteous, justified state, having been declared so by God on the basis of his or her faith in the work of Christ on the cross. But God’s righteousness is more than a gift to mankind. It is more than a person becoming in right standing with God. It is first and foremost, a part of God’s nature and character.

God’s righteousness is an attribute of His divine nature that not only punishes sin, but also motivates Him to act salvifically on mankind’s behalf, in bringing man into right standing with Him. He did this by offering His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Denney Burk observes that “when interpreted as a possessive genitive, righteousness at its root is an attribute of the divine nature that can stand metonymically for God’s redemptive work through Christ.” Donald Carson observes that this righteousness is not altogether unrelated to the Old Testament Law. Rather, like Paul, he argues that this righteousness was witnessed by the law and the prophets. Carson observes that this righteousness is God’s righteousness which comes to all who believe.

Verse 21 of the text declares that the righteousness of God by faith was “witnessed by the law and the prophets.” This phrase is instructive for it signals that God’s righteousness was not a new discovery. Indeed it was planned and attested to both in the Mosaic Law and by the Old
Testament prophets. *Robertson Word Picture* offers that God’s righteousness of which Apostle Paul wrote was not a new discovery. Rather it was “witnessed by the law and the prophets . . . made plain continuously by God himself.” The *Asbury Bible Commentary* states that although this relationship was not earned by doing the law, the law nevertheless testifies of it. In fact, the Old Testament was designed to demonstrate to God’s people his righteousness, and points the way as to how they could attain this righteousness. God was constantly making this clear to his people in the Old Testament via the law and the prophets. William Lasor observes that the function of the narrative contained in Exodus through Numbers is to fulfill the promise that God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that “he would enter into a special relationship with them.” In other words, it was God’s desire and intention that His people should be in right standing with Him. How could one achieve this righteousness? This was a fundamental question of consideration to the author of Romans.

The traditional understanding of the Old Testament laws that sees a dichotomy between law and grace is ill-conceived for it presents a false notion that salvation under the Old Testament was accomplished by doggedly performing the works of the law, whereas under the New Covenant people are saved by faith alone. That is unfortunate for a careful study of the Old Testament shows that God’s people were never saved by working hard for righteousness. In fact, what the law and prophets witnessed to is that God’s righteousness is gained through grace and faith; “Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8, KJV); and Abraham believed God and “he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6, KJV).

Nowhere is the Old Testament witness to this righteousness under the new covenant more explicit than in Jeremiah 31:31-34, in which God promised to make a new covenant with Israel. This time the terms of the covenant would not be written on the tables of stone but in the hearts of men. Then in verse 34 God says: “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the LORD, for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” This is witness to God’s righteousness. This new way of attaining God’s righteousness was through a process that David Rhymer termed an “internalized Torah” in which the knowledge of God is gained by all without the necessity of an intermediary.” The wonderful thing about this righteousness is that it is available to both Jews and Gentiles, who all need it because “all have sinned” (v.23).

Verse 22 states that the righteousness which is by faith is “for all who believe.” The “all” here represents all of God’s people, who by faith would embrace Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul used the word πάντας (pâs) that is translated as “each, every, any, all, the whole, everyone, all things, everything.” Here *Robertson* comments that “justification or setting right with God is offered to both [Jews and Gentiles] on the same terms.” Italics added by the author. The blessing of this righteousness was first promised to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). Abraham was not a Jew when God called him, but obtained God’s righteousness by faith and became the representative head of all those who are of faith. Paul wrote that “those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Gal. 3:9). Since all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) then all who believe in Jesus are made righteous as a gift of God’s grace through the redeeming work of Christ (Rom. 3:24).

The nature of God’s righteousness is that it is a part of his character and is available to all who believe in Jesus Christ; both Jews and Gentiles. Also, the righteousness about which Paul wrote was not a new discovery. Rather, Paul used the Old Testament as his source to argue for God’s righteousness. Paul writes in verse 21 that this righteousness is attested to by the law and
the prophets, meaning the Old Testament.

**God’s Righteousness Revealed in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24-25a)**

In this section of the passage the *Interlinear New Testament* reads: “being justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus whom displayed God [as] a propitiation through faith in his blood.” God’s righteousness is revealed through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The concept of redemption means that there is a cost to the redeemer. T. D. Stegman says that it was a “sacrifice,” a price paid by Jesus’ blood. According to the *Asbury Bible Commentary*, it cost God dearly; that is, the life of His Son Jesus, to demonstrate God’s righteousness. God revealed this righteousness as a means of vindicating His name. James Montgomery Boice argues that for centuries God had passed over the former sins of His people. The question then is, is God a just God? The answer is yes. He writes: “in the death of Christ God’s name and purposes are vindicated. It is now seen that on the basis of that death, God had justified and continues to justify the ungodly.” Donald Guthrie expresses the same thought and adds that because man could not attain righteousness by himself, God provided a way that man could become righteous before God. He reasons that God is able to forgive man’s sins and still remains righteous because of the propitiation; that is the substitutionary nature of Christ’s sacrifice. In so far now as one puts his faith in Christ, he becomes righteous before God.

It was earlier observed that God revealed his righteousness, which was demonstrated in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. The redemptive process carries the idea of propitiation in which the sins of God’s people were transferred to Jesus Christ. Paul used the Greek word ἡλιαστήριον (*hilastérion*) which is translated as “a means of appeasing or expiating.” This harkens back to the Old Testament Day of Atonement ritual where the blood of the expiatory victim was offered to God for the sins of the people which appeased God.

Now under the new covenant a person becomes a partaker of that righteousness through faith in his [Christ’s] blood. The Greek word used for faith is πίστεως, (*pístis*). *Netbible.org* defines this as “reliance upon Christ for salvation.” Mark Seifrid has nuanced this by arguing that God’s righteousness as revealed in Christ for salvation on our behalf is “through the faith of Jesus Christ,” rather than “faith in Christ,” or the “faith/faithfulness of Christ.” Whatever may be his meaning, it would appear that the preponderance of biblical teaching is that this righteousness is appropriated to people only to the extent that they put their faith in Christ. Mankind responds to this revealed righteousness by faith. It is evident that the source and standard of righteousness is God who revealed such righteousness in Jesus Christ. One must however, appropriate God’s righteousness by faith in Christ. But what was the purpose God revealed his righteousness? This is now the critical question.

**The Purpose of God’s Righteousness (Rom. 3:25b-26)**

The text tells us that through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, people have been justified, or made right with God (v. 24). Observe in verse 25 that God has “presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.” The NASB states that Christ was “displayed publicly as propitiation.” The Greek word used for publicly displayed, προέθετο, (*protithemai*) which *Netbible.org* translates, “to place before, to set forth, to set forth to be looked at, expose to view, or to expose to public view,” seems a deliberate effort by the author to signal to the reader that God wanted this transaction to be visible to all. This was to show that God is righteous and cannot tolerate sin. It may have appeared to observers over the centuries that God was not just, for if He were a God of justice, how could he overlook the sins of his people? After all, he declared that the soul that sins must die (Ez. 18:4). To thus overlook sin
may have seemed to be out of character to a God of justice. The public display of Jesus as an offering for sin was to demonstrate that he is true to his righteous nature. The Greek word for demonstrate is ἔνδειξις (endeíknymi). Timothy Friberg, Barbara Fribuer, and Neva Miller define it as “as strictly pointing out, proof, public information, demonstration, proof showing forth.” So God presented Jesus’ atoning death as proof of His just nature.

God always does what is right (Gen.18:25) and according to Wayne Grudem God is “himself the final standard of what is right.” The Asbury Bible Commentary indicates that by “presenting Jesus as the propitiation, God's attitude—his righteous wrath toward sin—is clearly demonstrated.

Verse 26 of the text captures the purpose of the demonstration of God’s righteousness; It is so that “he would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” If God could not prove that he is a God that takes sin seriously, on what basis could he really justify, or make anyone righteous? Is there an objective standard of righteousness? By publicly displaying Jesus as the one who satisfied God’s justice for committed sins, God is able to make righteous anyone who puts his or her faith in Jesus. God has the moral and judicial basis on which to acquit anyone who puts his or her faith in Jesus, for since Jesus paid the price of such sin, to charge the believer with it would be double jeopardy. Andrew Snider posits that the words “just” and “justifier” speak to the “gracious intention of God's omnibenevolence:” but must demonstrate that his “gracious disposition harmonizes with His righteousness.” . . .“God cannot be a “justifier” if He is not also “just” in doing so. The death of Jesus settles the question as to whether or not God is a God of justice.

Application

By Jesus Christ’s propitiating death on the cross the Father imputes his righteousness to all those who put their faith in Christ. Yarnell correctly observes that justification is by God’s grace whereby God declares believers righteous based on the work of Jesus on the cross. He writes that “the righteousness of Jesus Christ is possessed potentially through Christ's union with human nature and actually through a man's union with Christ by the gift of faith.” Working hard and doing good deeds will not make one righteous, because “all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.” The thesis of this paper is that Romans 3:21-26 teaches that God is righteous and cares deeply about, and punishes sins, although he had overlook sins committed in the past (v 25). God imputes his righteousness to the account of those who believe in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Since Jesus Christ satisfied God’s demands for justice, when a believer comes to Christ, God no longer looks at his sins, but instead sees the one (Jesus Christ) who perfectly fulfilled his demands for justice. That theology was true of the first century believers as it is of believers in the twenty first century.

Conclusion

This exegetical study of Romans 3:21-26 deals with the nature of God’s righteousness, the declaration of God’s righteousness in Jesus Christ, and the purpose of God’s righteousness. Several important words in this passage stand out: righteousness, believe, justified, just, justifier redemption, propitiation. The Greek word for righteousness is δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosýnē) is the most prominent in this passage. It appears four times. The semantic range of the word righteousness in Net.Bible.org indicates that this word is translated variably as righteousness, right, justice, has righteousness, and righteously.

The study demonstrates that God is righteous and is indeed the standard of righteousness. God punishes sin notwithstanding the fact that he had “passed over the sins previously
committed” (v 25). In the death of Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins that are committed, God demonstrated his justice. The sins of mankind having been transferred to Jesus, God required his death. Because of that God declares a person righteous who puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ. So the righteousness of God that the believer receives is not his own, nor does it come from the law. Rather it is by accepting the righteousness of Jesus Christ that God declares such a person righteous. Stated differently, when a believer accepts what Jesus did on the cross he or she becomes judicially in right standing with God, having been acquitted of all the sins that he had committed, for Jesus paid for those sins by His sacrificial death on the cross. Because of the demonstration of God’s righteousness, a person stands in a right relationship with God although he may not be yet morally clean. However being in right standing with God should impact one’s morality and lead one into a closer walk with God. Paul rightly exhorts:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).
Bibliography


Seifrid, Mark A. "The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N T Wright." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 19-44.


Appendix A

Block Diagram on Romans 3:21-23 (NASB)

The Righteousness of God by Faith

The Presenting of God’s Righteousness
3:21  But now
    apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested,
    being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

The Particulars of God’s Righteousness
3:22  even the righteousness of God
    through faith in Jesus Christ
    for all those who believe;
    for there is no distinction;

The Pitiful State of Humanity
3:23  for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The Process of Righteousness
3:24  being justified
    as a gift by His grace
    through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

3:25  whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.
    This was to demonstrate His righteousness,
    because
    in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

The Product of God’s Righteousness
3:26  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.

Reference


Mounce, Greek, 57.