

God's Justice - Romans 3:21-31

Sin and Justification (being made just) in Jewish Literature

Justification is a religious word that gets lost in translation. For our purposes it is important to remember that the root of justification is justice. What we are talking about is “being made just.” This is part of the relationship we have with God and what Paul will argue in this next section.

“Paul’s terminology of sin and justification was undoubtedly dependent on the Scriptures and subsequent Jewish tradition. Justification was the answer to Israel’s dilemma. According to the exilic prophet, Israel is in captivity as the result of her own sin [Isaiah 40:2; 42:24; 43:25], and the problem will be saved when God acts to vindicate the people. God’s righteousness [*dikaiosyne*] is the saving deed that will rescue Israel [cf. Isaiah 41:2; 42:6; 45:8, 13; 46:13]..... Thus the phrase ‘forgiveness of sins’ is not the remission of individual sins but in the remission of the whole nation’s sins. God’s righteousness [*justice*, my translation] is the saving event for the exiled people of God when God will restore the fortunes of Israel... Sin, Justification, and forgiveness were understood in corporate terms as the exile and restoration of Israel (Thompson, *The Church According to Paul*, 129-130).”

Justice is a key political term. Paul is arguing that this takes places outside of established human systems - both Roman and Judean.

“In the perspective of the greatest thinkers of the political, justice is made to coincide with the law. It is through the law that human societies, and thus human members of society, are made to be just. But Paul has come to the conclusion that law cannot produce justice, that there is an irreconcilable conflict between justice and law, that if there is to be justice, it must come apart from the law, as outlaw justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 60).”

“The efficacy of the law in producing justice is severely limited: it produces only enough just persons as to demonstrate that humanity is without excuse, relative to the demands of the law. If absolutely none were just, we could say that it’s no use; it’s impossible. So that presence of some, even very few, who are or seem to be just demonstrates the guilt of the totality, for the totality is not just, neither the Greco-Roman nor the Judean totality. On the contrary, these totalities are marked by their injustice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 63).”

Romans 3:21-31 (my translation)

“But now, apart from law, the justice of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, 22 the justice of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who are faithful. For there is no distinction, 23 since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God [divine radiance]; 24 they are now made just by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement through faithfulness by his blood. God did this to show his justice, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; 26 it was to prove at the present time [*kairou* - God’s time] that God should be just and make just the one with the faithfulness [loyalty] of Jesus.”

27 Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faithfulness. 28 For we hold that a person is made just by faithfulness apart from works prescribed by the law. 29 Or is God the God of Judeans only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is one; and he will make just the circumcised on the ground of faithfulness and the uncircumcised through that same faithfulness. 31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faithfulness? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

The Faithfulness of Christ

Reflecting on verse 22:

“Here this phrase specifies the agents of loyalty: from or through the loyalty of Joshua (which testifies to or shows divine justice) to or for the loyalty of all those who are also faithful or loyal. That is, the faithfulness of the Messiah brings about, or provokes, or intends the faithfulness of others, those who are or become faithful in the same way (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 64).”

On the translation of “faithfulness of Christ” in verse 22:

“Older translations always substitute faith *in* Joshua for faithfulness of Joshua. Even apart from the implausibility of this construction of the Greek grammar, this mistranslation undercuts the direction of Paul's argument in such a way as to eliminate the force of his concern with justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 60-61).”

Paul is concerned with Jesus's response to what God is doing in the world. Jesus is faithful to God's justice, even through the injustice of the cross.

The “glory of God,” or “divine radiance” in verse 23:

“Is this ‘glory’ another name for justice? Is this the whole point of justice, that justice is itself the divine radiance, the divine shining forth, another name for God as such, or God as ‘present?’ Justice is not then an afterthought to God but is God's very radiance or shining forth, God's being (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 65).”

Reflecting on verses 24-26:

“We begin with what is clear: we are concerned with justice, divine justice. We are pointed to loyalty or faithfulness, again the faithfulness of the messiah Joshua and that of those who become loyal in the same way or who participate in that faithfulness. The justice of God has to do with the divine kindness or forbearance that has withheld the wrath and fury and chosen another course, something related to what is called free gift, free favor, or sheer generosity [*charis*] (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 66).”

“At this point something is opening up, a contrast between gift and something else: law perhaps. Gift is outside the law. Which law? The law of exchange, of retribution and distribution (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 66).”

“This faithfulness to the death [blood] will produce redemption, that is, liberation of captives or prisoners or slaves. What happens in and through the messiah is to release them from that which is unjust and perhaps from the law considered as an instrument of injustice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 67).”

Here we must keep the Exodus in mind. The Exodus event was the moment of liberation for the people of Israel. It was a free gift from God, who wanted to fulfill the promise made the Abraham to make Israel a great nation. The Exodus gave the people hope during their time in Babylon. God will act on their behalf, a gift of God’s grace.

Paul argues that God does something new through Jesus’ faithfulness. God acted justly outside of the law, delivery all people from the power of death.

“What God has done in or through or on account of the loyalty of Joshua [Jesus] is to demonstrate God’s own justice, and God does this not only by being patient and withholding wrath [2:4] but also by providing for the construction of justice that does not depend on the violence of the law and that perhaps even exposes that violence and contrasts it with another way - that of loyalty (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 67).”

Reflecting on verses 28-31:

“This seems to place Paul’s observations about doing the law as that which leads to justice on a new basis. The basis now is not doing the law but rather loyalty. Paul will still have to explain how it is that faithfulness leads not to ‘works’ but to fulfilling the law [of the intention of the law]. Those who are loyal, whether circumcised or not, are justified - made or caused to be just (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 68).”

“The oneness of God [perhaps an echo or Deuteronomy 6:4] is not a theoretical perspective but a practical one. It involves the relation of the divine to all nations, with the favor of God to all, and with the claim of justice upon all (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 68).”

“We are presented with a faithfulness that is outside law yet establishes law. Let us suppose that this means a justice outside the law [and in some ways even against the law], but still justice, and so that at which the law aims - that in the name of which the law stands - and so it is justice that is the true aim or content of the law. Of course, this works only if what remains unshaken is precisely justice: God’s and thus also ours - justice that is heeded in and through loyalty (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 68-69).”