

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of theology today. We are in the midst of covering soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, and last time we just began to cover justification, which is the heart of the gospel. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to begin today?

Dr. Spencer: By reading the verses from Romans that I mentioned at the very end of our last session. We read in Romans 3:21-26, “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

**Marc Roby:** That is a truly marvelous and theologically rich passage. What do you want to say about it?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to note that these verses speak about a “righteousness from God”, which comes “through faith”, and that we are “justified freely” through the redemption earned by Christ. James Boice wrote that “justification by faith is God’s answer to the most basic of all religious questions: How can a man or woman become right with God?”<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby:** And, of course, as the passage notes, the bad news is that we have all sinned, so no one is right with God on his own.

Dr. Spencer: That is the problem. We have a bad inheritance from our first father, Adam. Because he was our representative before God, when he sinned, which is called the fall, we all sinned in him. Therefore, we inherit both his guilt and his sinful nature. And because of our sinful nature, we all personally sin and increase our guilt daily. Question 17 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “Into what estate did the fall bring mankind?”

**Marc Roby:** And the answer says, “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.”

Dr. Spencer: Which is the Catechism’s way of expressing the bad news. Certainly, when we look at the history of the world, we see the truth of this statement. It doesn’t negate the fact that life can have many legitimate joys and pleasures, but when you look at all of the sickness, cruelty, wars and even death itself, calling this an estate of sin and misery is accurate. But even worse is

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<sup>2</sup> James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 416

the fact that we must all face judgment at the end of this life. Every single human being will then either go to eternal heaven, or eternal hell. There are no other options.

**Marc Roby: And Jesus said the same thing. In Matthew 25:46, he famously said that sinners, “will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”**

Dr. Spencer: And we are all sinners. Hence, to rephrase Boice, the most basic of all religious questions, and I would say the most basic and important of *all* questions of *any* type, is “How can a sinner be made right with God?” Our eternal destiny depends on being right with God.

And modern Christianity often tragically neglects this most basic question. The focus is often on how God can help us to live better lives here and now. But as Christ himself asked, in Mark 8:36, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”

**Marc Roby: And by forfeiting the soul, Christ was referring to going to eternal hell.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Nothing could be worse. It doesn’t matter how good this life is if you go to hell. And there is another heresy that is common among those few churches that do talk about heaven and hell or, more often, just about heaven. They will often present a gospel that, in effect, claims that you can earn your way to heaven. Many people think that God grades on a curve. That he will look at our life and weigh, if you will, the good and the bad things we do and so long as the good outweigh the bad, we will go to heaven. But that is not what the Bible says. Jesus told us, in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

**Marc Roby: And, of course, no one can meet that standard.**

Dr. Spencer: No, we can’t. Even if a man lives a perfect life from the moment he is born again, he won’t be saved by his own righteousness because he sinned before that time. He is not perfect.

**Marc Roby: And no one ever lives a perfect life, even after being saved.**

Dr. Spencer: Well, that is certainly true. But even if someone did, it wouldn’t be enough. There are 162 games in a normal major-league baseball season and if a team loses the first game, then it can’t have a perfect season. Even if it wins the next 161 games in a row, it still isn’t a perfect season. God does not grade on a curve. He is perfect and we must be perfect to be in heaven with him.

**Marc Roby: Well, that makes it sound hopeless given the fact that no one is perfect.**

Dr. Spencer: But there is hope in God because he can make us perfect. But that is a different topic, which we will get to later. For now I want to stick with justification, and justification isn’t about making us perfect, it is about our legal standing before God. In other words, it is about our guilt. God will ultimately perfect us, and he has begun that work in every born-again person, but our justification is not related to our own righteousness, that is a very common misunderstanding.

Notice what Paul wrote in the passage we started with. He said, “But now a righteousness *from* God ... has been made known”, and that “This righteousness *from* God comes through faith in Jesus Christ ...”. In other words, this righteousness is not our own, it comes from God.

**Marc Roby: I’m glad to hear that.**

Dr. Spencer: And so is every person whose eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit to see his own sin clearly. In his commentary on this passage, Martin Luther quoted St. Augustine, who wrote that Paul, “does not speak of the righteousness of God, by which God is righteous, but of that with which He clothes a person when He justifies the ungodly.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, this is speaking about the righteousness that is imputed to us when we place our trust in Christ. We spoke about the double imputation last week; God imputes our sin to Christ – meaning he places our sin in Christ’s account, and he imputes Christ’s righteousness to us – meaning he places his righteousness in our account.

**Marc Roby: Augustine’s writing that God clothes us with this righteousness is a very descriptive way of putting it, and it completely agrees with the Bible. In Romans 13:14 Paul wrote that we should clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: And it also harkens back to the Old Testament. In one of the visions given to the prophet Zechariah, we see the high priest Joshua presented before God’s court. We read in Zechariah 3:3, “Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.” The filthy clothes represent Joshua’s sin. In his natural state he was not worthy of coming into God’s presence. And then, in Verse 4, we read, “The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’” In other words, he clothed Joshua in righteousness that came from God. That is the only way we can be declared righteous, or just, in God’s sight. We cannot earn our salvation, it is a gift.

**Marc Roby: And, since you referred to God’s court, we could say that this justification is a legal declaration of God.**

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what it is. In his systematic theology, Wayne Grudem defines it this way: “Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.”<sup>4</sup> Theologians sometime use the word forensic, which simply means having to do with the law, so this doctrine can be called forensic justification. We’ll talk about this more when we get to the nature of justification, but there is something else I want to discuss first. Theologians sometimes speak of the “triangle of salvation”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: Now, what is that?**

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, Trans. By J.T. Mueller, Kregel Publications, 1976, pg. 76

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 723

<sup>5</sup> E.g., P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 133, and Boice, op. cit., pp 322-323

Dr. Spencer: It is a useful way of describing the different aspects of salvation, which can sometimes be confusing to people because different terms are used for the different aspects of salvation and there is some overlap in the meaning and use of the terms. For example, in Matthew 1:21 we are told that Jesus was named Jesus because, “he will save his people from their sins.” That uses the generic term “save”, which has a range of uses. Then, in Luke 1:68 we read about John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, saying, “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” That talks about being redeemed, which is more specific and we will discuss that in a moment. And in the verses we are considering now, we read in Romans 3:24-25 that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.” These speak about being justified, and about redemption, and about a sacrifice of atonement, or it would be better to translate that as a propitiation.

**Marc Roby: OK, there are a lot of different words used here. So what are the important differences and how does this so-called triangle of salvation come into play?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, let’s define some terms first. The word atone means to make amends for some wrong that has been done to someone. It is a fairly general term that can apply to the whole of Christ’s work in paying the penalty we owe because of our sinful rebellion against God. Redemption, on the other hand, is more specific and refers, for example, to paying a ransom to free a prisoner or a slave.<sup>6</sup> Justification, as we have already said, is a judicial term and refers to declaring someone to be just, or righteous in the sight of the law. And, finally, to propitiate means to pacify, to appease, in other words to regain the favor of an offended party.<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby: And God is the offended party in this case.**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. To quote John Murray’s excellent book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, which we have used a number of times, “sin evokes the holy displeasure or wrath of God. Vengeance is the reaction of the holiness of God to sin”.<sup>8</sup> To propitiate is to pacify God’s just wrath. And this is done, specifically, by covering our sins. To quote John Murray again, “Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure.”<sup>9</sup> He also wrote that in the Hebrew of the Old Testament, propitiation “is expressed by a word which means to ‘cover.’”<sup>10</sup>

**Marc Roby: That makes me think of Psalm 32, that wonderful penitent psalm of King David. That psalm begins by saying, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great psalm and it uses poetic parallelism to equate having our transgressions forgiven with having our sins covered. The Greek word used in Romans 3:25,

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., see Boice, op. cit., pp 323-330

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Webster’s says “to gain or regain the favor or goodwill of”, also see Ref. 8

<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 30

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

which the NIV translates as “sacrifice of atonement”, but which the ESV<sup>11</sup> more correctly translates as “propitiation”, is ἱλαστήριον (hilastērion). This word is used in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time of Christ, to refer to the atonement cover on the Ark of the Covenant.

**Marc Roby: I remember that we have discussed the symbolism of the atonement cover before.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we have. In Session 134 we noted that in the Old Testament period the high priest would go into the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, which is the atonement cover. The ark contained the law of God, which the people had broken and which, therefore, testified against them. The symbolism was that when God, who appeared above the cover, looked down toward the ark, his view of the law would be blocked by the blood. In other words, the blood covered the tablets of the law, which testified against the people.

**Marc Roby: And so, Christ’s sacrifice of atonement, to use the NIV translation, refers to his having covered our sins with his own blood.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is offensive to modern man, but that is the symbolism used. And the fact that it is offensive is appropriate. Sin is ugly. Sin is offensive. It must be punished. It is a topic that we should find very disturbing. And we are told in Hebrews 9:22 that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

**Marc Roby: Which immediately makes me think of Leviticus 17:11, where God explains why the Jews were prohibited from eating meat with the blood still in it. God said, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that verse is foundational. Now, I personally don’t like blood. I could never have been a medical doctor. But we need to come to grips with how serious sin really is. We need to personalize these things. I need to realize that *my* sin is so ugly that God, being the holy and just Judge of the universe, could not forgive my sin without its having been paid for by blood, it had to be covered. Either my blood, or some acceptable substitute. And I am eternally grateful that God provided Jesus Christ, the only acceptable substitute, and the final sacrifice to which the entire Old Testament sacrificial system pointed. He provided propitiation for me.

**Marc Roby: And now that we have these three terms defined, justification, propitiation and redemption, what is the triangle of salvation?**

Dr. Spencer: It is a good way of visualizing the amazing completeness of Christ’s work on our behalf. Picture a triangle with a horizontal base and one of the vertices on top in the middle. In other words, it is shaped like a mountain. That top vertex, or the peak of the mountain, is God the Father, the vertex on the bottom-left is Jesus Christ, in other words God the Son, and the vertex on the bottom-right is a Christian. Each side of the triangle represents a relationship, but

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<sup>11</sup> English Standard Version

specifically with regard to our salvation. The bottom represents our relationship to Christ; he is our Redeemer. The left side represents Christ's relationship to the Father; Christ is our Propitiation. His sacrifice appeases the wrath of God. The right side represents our relationship to the Father; he justifies us.<sup>12</sup>

**Marc Roby: We are certainly the winners here in every transaction! Christ provides our propitiation, he redeems us, and God the Father justifies us.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are blessed beyond our wildest imagination, and we contribute nothing positive to our justification, we only contribute our sin, which is entirely negative. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

**Marc Roby: I know that there are theologians who disagree with the idea of propitiation.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there are some who don't like the idea of God being angry and wrathful toward men. But they have to do some exegetical gymnastics to try and avoid the clear biblical teaching about the anger and wrath of God. For example, in speaking to the Israelites on the plains of Moab to prepare them for entering the Promised Land, Moses told them, in Deuteronomy 9:8, that "At Horeb you aroused the LORD's wrath so that he was angry enough to destroy you."

**Marc Roby: And Moses was referring to the time the people had Aaron make a golden calf as an idol for them to worship while Moses was on the mountain speaking to God.<sup>13</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. It is impossible to read the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, and miss the fact that God is angry with sin and wrathful toward sinners. We are told in Psalm 2:12, for example, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment." And in Psalm 7:11 we are told that "God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day." The prophet Jeremiah spoke the Word of the Lord to the people in Jerusalem to warn them prior to the Babylonian captivity. And in Jeremiah 32:31 we read that God said, "From the day it was built until now, this city has so aroused my anger and wrath that I must remove it from my sight." There are literally dozens and dozens of other verses I could cite.

**Marc Roby: And the same message is also found in the New Testament. In John 3:36, no less than John the Baptist said, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." And in Romans 1:18 Paul wrote that "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness", and then again in Romans 2:8 Paul wrote, "But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."**

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<sup>12</sup> See Boice, op. cit., pg. 323

<sup>13</sup> See Exodus 32:1-8

Dr. Spencer: And Revelation 6:16 speaks of the wrath of the Lamb, which refers to Jesus Christ. And then in Revelation 19:15 we are told the following about Christ, “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.” So no one should think that it is only the Father who is wrathful. God is one. We need Christ to propitiate the wrath of God, which is against every sinner.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to learning more about how Christ accomplished that great work for his people, but we are out of time for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We appreciate hearing from you.