

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today and we are in the midst of covering soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Last week we defined some terms and presented the triangle of salvation, which shows the relations between God the Father, Jesus Christ and an individual believer. The triangle has God the Father at the top, Jesus Christ on the bottom left and a Christian on the bottom right. The bottom side, that is, connecting Christ to the Christian, represents the fact that Jesus Christ redeems us. The left side, connecting Christ and the Father, represents the fact that Christ propitiates or appeases the wrath of God for us, and the right side, connecting the Father to the believer, represents the fact that the Father then declares us just, or legally righteous, based on the work of Jesus Christ. We ended by making the biblical case that God is, indeed, angry with sin and wrathful toward sinners and does, therefore, need to be propitiated. Dr. Spencer, how do you want to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to say just a couple of additional things about propitiation and then move on to the topic of justification.

Marc Roby: Alright, what else do you want to say about propitiation?

Dr. Spencer: That it is very frequently misunderstood. As John Murray points out in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, this doctrine is sometimes falsely presented as though propitiation means that God the Father is full of wrath and then Jesus, who is all loving, comes along and somehow wins him over and changes his wrath to love. But that view, or anything like it, is entirely unbiblical. We must remember the quote we gave from Murray in Session 175, “No treatment of the atonement can be properly oriented that does not trace its source to the free and sovereign love of God.”¹

Marc Roby: Yes, that certainly argues against this false notion of propitiation, and Murray’s statement is biblical. In fact, I remember that last week you noted that Revelation 6:16 speaks of the wrath of the Lamb, which refers to Jesus Christ. So, in a sense, Christ’s sacrifice propitiates his *own* wrath.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s true. It is the triune God who is wrathful, not just the Father. And God’s being angry with sin and wrathful toward sinners is not incompatible with his having chosen, in love, to save some of those sinners. Murray wrote, “God is love. But the supreme object of that love is himself. And because he loves himself supremely he cannot suffer what belongs to the integrity of his character and glory to be compromised or curtailed. That is the reason for the propitiation. God appeases his own holy wrath in the cross of Christ in order that the purpose of his love to lost men may be accomplished in accordance with and to the vindication of all the perfections that constitute his glory.”²

Marc Roby: That’s a marvelous statement and it agrees with what you just said, Murray wrote that God appeases his *own* holy wrath. And it is wrong to pit the Father against the Son. But

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 9

² *Ibid*, pg. 32

some of our listeners may be disturbed by the idea that the supreme object of God's love is himself.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure some will be bothered by that. But there is nothing more lovable than God. So, if you think about it for a moment, this has nothing in common with a man being egotistical and loving himself above all. If God didn't love himself supremely, there would be something wrong, because there is no better object for his love. And God is also holy and just and, as Murray writes, "The wrath of God is the inevitable reaction of the divine holiness against sin."³

Marc Roby: I like that way of putting it. It is inevitable that the holy God be wrathful toward sin.

Dr. Spencer: And, therefore, sin *must* be dealt with in order for God, who is love, to save sinners. Murray sums it up this way; "To deny propitiation is to undermine the nature of the atonement as the vicarious endurance of the penalty of sin. In a word, it is to deny substitutionary atonement."⁴

Marc Roby: In other words, it is to deny the work accomplished by Christ on the cross in saving sinners.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Sin is rebellion against God and an attack on his sovereignty and character. As Murray points out, "God cannot be indifferent to or complacent towards that which is the contradiction of himself."⁵

Marc Roby: Very well. Are we done with propitiation?

Dr. Spencer: We are.

Marc Roby: Alright. You said you wanted to move on to discuss justification next, which is the right side of the triangle of salvation. How would you like to begin there?

Dr. Spencer: I want our listeners to picture themselves seated in God's heavenly courtroom. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine facing God. He knows everything you have ever thought, said or done. And he knows it all perfectly. No defense can possibly be given. You are guilty of cosmic rebellion against the King of kings. You have violated his laws. You know it, and he knows it far more fully than you do! If you are declared guilty, which would be completely just, the punishment is eternal hell. Now, with that horrible picture in mind, I want to ask, what would you say in your defense?

Marc Roby: I know what I would say. I would cry out, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!"

Dr. Spencer: And that is the *only* answer that can save you. Anything else will condemn you. And if a person balks at anything I just said – either he thinks he isn't really that bad, or that God isn't really so harsh in judging sinners, then he needs to read his Bible more carefully and cry out to God to have mercy and grant him understanding. But if, by God's gracious work of regeneration, a person is able to answer as you did in all sincerity and truth, then that person will

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, pp 32-33

⁵ Ibid, pg. 117

be saved, God will pronounce him just, or righteous in his sight. But *not* because he actually is, in himself, righteous. As Paul wrote in Titus 3:5, God saved us, “not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”⁶.

Marc Roby: Praise God for his amazing mercy.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. But we also have to note that the answer you gave is very important. You simply said, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!” But the simplicity of that answer in no way detracts from how profound it is. And you were, of course, simply quoting the Bible, and I think it would be worthwhile to read the passage from which you quoted.

Marc Roby: Okay, In Luke 18:9-14 we read, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’”

Dr. Spencer: And to understand that parable correctly, we must remember that the Pharisees were the strictest sect of Jews at the time of Jesus. They were well known for zealously keeping a very long list of rules, which they thought encapsulated God’s laws. They were looked up to by the people as very pious. While tax collectors, on the other hand, were among the lowest people. They were considered traitors for gathering taxes from their own people for the Roman government and, even worse, they were often greedy and became wealthy by collecting more tax than was necessary.

Marc Roby: And so, Jesus’ listeners would have been quite surprised by the outcome of this parable.

Dr. Spencer: Shocked and angry might be a more accurate description of their reaction. But we must take note of the simple prayer of the tax collector. First, he acknowledged that he was a sinner. Second, he didn’t think that he could in any way pay for his sins. He didn’t ask for justice, he cried out for mercy. God delights in showing mercy to people who come to him in true humility, which requires that they be born again as Christ said in John 3 verses 3 and 5. And notice what Jesus said, the tax collector went home justified.

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Now, there is absolutely no reason to think that the tax collector was somehow made perfect at that moment, so we must realize that this statement is a legal declaration about the man's status before God. It is not a statement about his own character. He was still a sinner and very far from righteous in himself. So, we should ask, "How it is possible for God to justify him?"

Marc Roby: Well, certainly, we know that God cannot lie and he always does what is just and right.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. And the answer to the question of how God can justify this man, or any sinful man, is given in the passage from Romans 3 that we have been looking at for the past two sessions. In Romans 3:25-26 we read that "God presented him [meaning Jesus Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement [or we could say, a propitiation], 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." This tells us that God is just when he justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Marc Roby: And we can conclude from that statement, combined with the fact that Jesus said the tax collector went home justified, that this tax collector had been born again and had true faith in Jesus.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's an obvious conclusion. And his faith was the instrument that united him to Christ so that his sins were imputed to Christ and Christ's righteousness was imputed to him. That is the glorious double imputation we have spoken about a number of times and it comes as a result of our union with Christ. Perhaps it would help if I gave an earthly example of a similar union.

Marc Roby: Yes, please do.

Dr. Spencer: When a man and woman get married, and I'm speaking about a biblical marriage here, I'm not talking about what the laws of any given state or country may say ... In any event, when a man and a woman get married, they are united by that marriage and become one in many respects. If the husband owed \$100,000 when they got married, that liability now belongs to the wife as well. Similarly, if the husband had \$100,000 in the bank, that money now belongs to the wife as well. The husband and the wife are one; they are united.

Marc Roby: And when we place our trust in Jesus Christ, we are united to him as well.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And by being united with Christ, our liabilities, our sins in other words, are placed in his account and are considered paid for by his substitutionary atonement. At the same time, his perfect righteousness is placed in our account. We are clothed in the righteousness of Christ to use the language used by Paul in Romans 13:14 as we noted last week.

Marc Roby: And we could add that Paul wrote, in Galatians 3:27, that "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a great verse as well. We read the passage from Zechariah Chapter Three last week, where the high priest Joshua had his filthy clothes removed and was given rich

garments to wear instead. This is what happens when a true believer comes before God in judgement. Our sins are not counted against us. They are counted as having been paid for by Christ and we are seen clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. And it is on that basis that God declares us just. It isn't because we *are* righteous in ourselves. Paul wrote in Romans 4:5 that God justifies the wicked.

Marc Roby: Hallelujah! God's plan of salvation is truly remarkable. It is not anything that a human being would conjure up.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. All man-made religions, if they contain the idea of salvation at all, have men earning their salvation in some way. Only Christianity gives us God's eternal plan for saving sinful people. But we must note that he has not simply set his anger and wrath aside. At the end of our session last week we read a few of the many verses in the Bible that clearly show God is angry with sin and wrathful toward sinners. He is also, as our passage in Romans Three says, just. He is the just Judge of the universe. He doesn't just wink at sin, he deals with it. Sin *must* be punished for God to be just. Notice again what it says in Romans 3:25, "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". Now, we must ask, "What sins did God leave unpunished?"

Marc Roby: That's a good question.

Dr. Spencer: And the verse tells us that it was, "the sins committed beforehand" that were left unpunished. And, in context, that clearly refers to the sins committed prior to Christ's sacrifice of atonement. Old Testament believers were saved just as we are, by being united to Christ by faith. But their sins were left unpunished *until* Christ came. They were punished in Christ, just like our sins were. So, in the end, no sins are left unpunished. God is just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. As the Rev. P.G. Mathew wrote, "The saints of the Old Testament looked forward to the cross and their sins were forgiven, we look backward to the cross for the forgiveness of our sins."⁷

Marc Roby: That is wonderful. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Dr. Spencer: That is the gospel in a nutshell. We've used that verse many times because the double imputation, or double transaction, of which it speaks is the heart of the gospel message. God is just and must punish sin. But he is also loving and has chosen to save some people. And we are all sinners and cannot pay the debt we owe. But what is impossible for man is possible for God. He sent his Son, the eternal second person of the holy Trinity, to become incarnate, live a perfect sinless life in fulfillment of the law, and then willingly give himself as a substitute on behalf of his chosen people. As the apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-19, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty

⁷ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 153

way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”

Marc Roby: It is impossible to understand the depth of the love of God displayed in saving us from our sins.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. Justification is a legal declaration of God, but it is not a fiction or unjust in any way. It is like the marriage I spoke about earlier; the liabilities and assets of the husband and wife are merged when they are united in marriage. And when we are united to Christ by faith, our liabilities are merged with his assets. But his assets are infinite and totally swamp our liabilities. And, as a result, God declares us to be just.

Marc Roby: Now this legal, or forensic, view of justification differs from that of the Roman Catholic Church, doesn't it?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. I don't want to get into a lengthy discussion of the reformation now, but we must at least point out that the issue of justification was *the* central issue. It has been called the material cause of the reformation.⁸ According to Aristotle, the material cause of a statue, for example, is the material, perhaps some stone, out of which the statue is made. And, in much the same way, the doctrine of justification is the material out of which the reformation sprang.

Marc Roby: I remember that we briefly discussed the reformation in Session 155 while discussing saving faith.

Dr. Spencer: And we discussed it at that time because the true biblical doctrine of justification, which is also the reformed view, is that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone. Whereas, the Roman Catholic Church says that we are justified by grace through faith. They leave out the word alone because, in their unbiblical view, we are saved by the sacraments administered through the church. Theologians call the Roman Catholic view of justification analytic because, in the end, God analyzes us and declares us just, or righteous, because we *are* in fact righteous. This is a radically different view of justification and is completely irreconcilable with the Bible.

Marc Roby: What do theologians call the biblical, or reformed, view of justification?

Dr. Spencer: They call it synthetic because it is based on a righteousness that is not our own; it is, as we have been laboring to show, the righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to us when we are united to Christ by faith.

Marc Roby: Very well. I sense that we need to branch off in a new direction to discuss these two views, so this is a good place to end for today. Therefore, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to respond.

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, Baker Books, 1995, pg. 18