



Group Discussion Guide

Romans 3:19-31

For groups meeting February 9 evening through February 16 morning.

The law was meant to be, as John Piper said, “a description of the obedience of faith” and not a list of rules and regulations that if kept would earn favor with God. The law was to be received in faith and followed in faith. Living this way set Israel apart from the rest of the world and made them an example of what it meant to have a relationship with God. The concepts of receiving and following the law by faith were directly connected with how the law revealed sin (v. 20). Seeing the law meant seeing how mankind already had been violating the law, and how it could be violated in the years to come. Receiving and following the law took faith simply because of the reality of man’s sinful nature. How could the spirit and letter of the law possibly be kept by people who were unrighteous? How could they “be held accountable to God” (v. 19) and survive? The answer, of course, was found in the righteousness of God given to men (which once again points us right back to Romans 1:16-17).

This is where Paul takes his argument next. The law did not make God’s righteousness available to mankind. It merely revealed their need for His righteousness and called them to follow Him in faith as He slowly revealed His plan of redemption (v. 21). Paul wrote that the Law and the Prophets pointed to how God would make His righteousness available “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe,” (v. 22). He explained again that every single person has sinned and falls short of God’s glory, and how God provided redemption through giving Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement (propitiation). This sacrifice satisfied his judgment and thus allowed people to receive salvation as a gift through placing their faith in Jesus Christ (vs. 23-25).

God presented Him, Christ, as a Sacrifice of atonement. The Greek word for “Sacrifice of atonement” is hilastērion, rendered “propitiation” in the KJV and the NASB. This noun is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Hebrews 9:5 for the mercy seat (niv, “the place of atonement”) of the tabernacle’s ark of the covenant. There a goat’s blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement to cover (atone) Israel’s sins (Lev. 16:15), and satisfy God for another year. Jesus’ death is the final sacrifice which completely satisfied God’s demands against sinful people, thus averting His wrath from those who believe. (The verb hilaskomai, “to satisfy by a sacrifice, to propitiate,” is used in Luke 18:13 [“have mercy”] and Heb. 2:17 [“make atonement”]. And the related noun, hilasmos, “propitiation,” appears in 1 John 2:2; 4:10.) Christ, God’s propitiatory Sacrifice for sin, was “presented” (lit., “set forth”), in contrast with the tabernacle’s mercy seat which was hidden from view.

John A. Witmer, “Romans,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 451.

In the second portion of verse 25, Paul indicated that God's provision of His Son as a sacrifice – a work of atonement apart from the law – demonstrated His righteousness because He had waited to judge the sins of those who lived before Christ. Those who lived before Christ and who believed God were also able to receive salvation through the Son. (Note: while it might be difficult for us to understand how this all works together, it does help to remember that time is of no consequence to God, and that He is all knowing.) Those who lived to see the sacrifice of Jesus (and those who lived after) witnessed God's righteousness "at the present time" as they saw how the giving of His Son fulfilled His justice against sin and allowed Him to justify (declare righteous) those who placed their faith in Jesus.

Paul concludes this chapter with a discussion of faith, works, the law, and how all of this affects humankind. Because we are justified by faith, there is no way to brag about knowing God. Given the context, the word translated as "law" in the phrases "law of works" and "law of faith" means a principle; so Paul was sending the message that the principle of salvation by faith is what eliminates the possibility of bragging about a special relationship with God (v. 27). He wrote that people are "justified by faith apart from the works of the law" (v. 28), and that both Jews and Gentiles who come to faith in Christ are justified by God (vs. 29-30). Paul then addresses the state of the law in light of the Gospel: it has not been overthrown, but rather it maintains its original value in leading people to faith in God. This is why Jesus said:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." (Matthew 5:17)

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the purpose of the Old Testament law? What do you think your perspective would be if you were a believer in Jesus who also had a Jewish background?
2. The truth that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” leads us to a right understanding of the human heart. Why is it important for us to make sure we apply it to our own lives before we focus on how it affects the people around us? What does it mean to you to know that God Himself provided a sacrifice of atonement for your sin? What is your response to this?
3. Why do you think it seems so hard to accept the reality that salvation is a gift instead of something that can be earned? How can you show grace to others in your life right now?
4. What does it mean to you to know that God Himself provided a sacrifice of atonement for your sin? What is your response to this?
5. God gave the law before He sent Jesus. How do we understand salvation for those who lived before Christ died on the cross?
6. Paul writes that God is “just and the justifier” (v. 26). What does this teach you about God? How can that understanding help you grow in your relationship to Him?
7. Are you tempted at times to “boast” about your relationship to God? If so, what do you think leads to this? How do you fight against this temptation?
8. What do you think Jesus meant by his statement in Matthew 5:17? How does this connect with what Paul writes in verse 31?