

Leviticus 16:15-19 (Opening)

¹⁵ “Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. ¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.

¹⁷ No one may be in the tent of meeting from the time he enters to make atonement in the Holy Place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel. ¹⁸ Then he shall go out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it, and shall take some of the blood of the bull and some of the blood of the goat, and put it on the horns of the altar all around. ¹⁹ And he shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times, and cleanse it and consecrate it from the uncleannesses of the people of Israel.

Introduction

There are many things that I like to do that some people get paid to do. But just because I like to do it doesn't mean I'm good at it.

I like to play guitar. I like to write poetry. I like to play piano. I like to take pictures. Sometimes, I like to draw.

I don't think I could get paid for doing any of them. I do OK for my own standards, but I don't think I'd meet anyone else's standards, and as long as I'm doing it for me, I don't really have to meet anyone else's standards.

I don't know why, but people seem to have really high standards when they pay someone for something.

I've thought many times about writing a book. Well, I guess I have written one, but I don't think anyone would want to read my master's thesis for Computer Science. Not unless you're having problems sleeping. But I don't think I could live off my writing abilities.

Most of us have dreams of doing things that we will never be able to make a living doing, because we don't meet the standards.

Our scripture for today, Romans 3:21-31, is all about meeting God's standards. God has the highest standards, which we know from reading the Law of Moses. Nobody has been able to meet God's standards except Jesus.

Let's take a look at Romans 3:21-31.

Romans 3:21-31

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the

redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

It has been said that Romans 3:21-26 is the most important paragraph ever written. I don't dispute that. It does require support from other places in Scripture so that we can understand this important paragraph, though.

There are three things in the first paragraph that I think are key to understanding what Paul is saying here. The first is in verse 22, and that's faith. The second is in verse 24, and that's justified or justification. The third is in verse 25, and that is translated as propitiation in the English Standard Version, but it's translated as expiation in the Revised Standard Version, and "sacrifice of atonement" in the New International Version. Remember folks, consistency is important.

Faith

Let's start with faith. Faith could be a lot of different things. The first two definitions of faith in the Miriam Webster dictionary are "allegiance to duty or a person: loyalty" and "fidelity to one's promises and sincerity of intentions". That's as good a place as any to start with.

The Greek word translated as faith is πίστις [*pistis* /**pis**-tis/]. In classical Greek literature pistis is generally defined as a trust in others. The verb form of pistis is πιστεύω [*pisteuo* /pist-**yoo**-o/] which we normally translate into English as believe.

In Hebrews 11, the writer gives some qualities that faith has, but not a full definition.

Hebrews 11:1-3

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

At this point the writer goes on to give examples of people from what we call the Old Testament who showed that they had faith, and how they showed it.

James also talks about faith in chapter 2 of his letter, but he's taking a little different angle. It seems that some of the people he was writing to had decided that faith alone was enough; that once you said you had faith you were good and could rest on your laurels, as it were. James says that's not the case.

James 2:14-26

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹ You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰ Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹ Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³ and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵ And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

James says to truly possess faith, you need two things: belief and some sort of action based on that belief. The writer of Hebrews uses the same model to describe faith in chapter 11 of Hebrews.

So, faith is a belief that leads to an action.

Justification

Now let’s look at justification. Paul says in verses 23 and 24 of Romans 3 that all have sinned and all are justified by God’s grace. The word here translated as justified is **δικαιόω** [*dikaioo* /dik·ah·yo·o/] which can also mean made righteous, or in a legal sense, to acquit or make free.

Paul uses this term in his sermon in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia, in Acts chapter 13. Here’s it’s translated as freed.

Acts 13:38-39

³⁸ Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, ³⁹ and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Paul is telling the Jews in the synagogue that the Law of Moses can't justify them or make them right with God, even though they try over and over to do it. Paul here again points to belief as the key (although we know from his other writings that belief is only the initial step, because of our previous definition of faith).

Paul also writes to the believers in Corinth about justification.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul points out that some of the Christians in Corinth had been involved in all sorts of sinful activities, but they were now out of that lifestyle and were now justified, in the name of Jesus Christ. They've cleaned up their acts, and God now has made them righteous. They are no longer being held accountable for those past sins.

Propitiation, Expiation, or what?

Now let's look at the difficult word in verse 25. The ESV that I use translates the word as propitiation. Propitiation is the act of making someone favorably inclined; appeasing; conciliating. You could say that propitiation is like covering for someone. The Greek word translated

here as propitiation is **ἱλαστήριον** [*hilasterion* /hil-as·tay·ree·on/]. In the Revised Standard Version this same word is translated as expiation. Expiation is the act of atoning for; making amends or reparation for; cleaning, you could say.

The problem with the word hilasterion is that it's only used twice in the New Testament, and it's not used in any classical Greek literature. The other location, Hebrews chapter 9, it's translated as Mercy Seat, as in the cover for the Ark of the Covenant. It's also used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word kapporeth, which is translated as Mercy Seat. And the Hebrew word kapporeth is not used anywhere else except referring to the Mercy Seat. But here's the bigger problem. We get the phrase Mercy Seat from the German translation of the Greek translation of the Hebrew. In all those transitions, the real meaning has been misplaced.

A closer look at the word kapporeth shows that it's similar to two other Hebrew words; one that means to cover, and one that means to clean.

So, the writer of Hebrews uses the word hilasterion in his description of the things used in worship in the Temple.

Hebrews 9:1-5

*¹ Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ² For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. ³ Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the **mercy seat**. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

There are places where a similar Greek word is used that is translated as propitiate or propitiation. That word is ἱλασμός [*hilasmos* /hil·as·mos/], and, like hilasterion is only used in the New Testament and the Septuagint, not in classical Greek literature. Hilasmos seems to mean an appeasing or something used to appease. John is the only writer who uses this word, and he uses it twice in his first letter. Let's look at 1 John, chapter 2.

1 John 2:1-6

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³ And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

I think a better translation for hilasterion would be "thing that atones" or "place of atonement". That describes what went on during the sacrifices on the "Day of Atonement" or Yom Kippur, when the High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle blood on the cover for the Ark of the Covenant. The High Priest would make atonement first for his sins and the sins of his family, and then for the sins of Israel. Notice that the Kippur of Yom Kippur is the root of the Hebrew word kapporeth, the word for the cover for the Ark of the Covenant.

The most important aspect of an atoning sacrifice is the blood. The writer of Hebrews explains it in chapter 9, starting in verse 19.

Hebrews 9:19-22

¹⁹ For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰ saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

So, what Paul is saying here in Romans 3:25, using this mysterious word that isn't used in any other writing except biblical writings, is that God made Jesus' death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. That sacrifice for us is like the yearly sacrifice for the Israelites on Yom Kippur, only this one is different because, as the writer of Hebrews says, in chapter 9:

Hebrews 9:11-12

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

In other words, He became the High Priest and sprinkled not the blood of an animal, but His own blood for our atonement; the perfect sacrifice because it was given by God for us. All we have to do is demonstrate our faith that we accept the free gift that has been given for us.

Summary

In verses 27 through 31 of Romans chapter 3, Paul asks more of his rhetorical questions. We don't have anything to boast about in getting

this free gift of God's grace through our faith in Jesus. We didn't do anything to get it, all we did was accept it. There was nothing on our part to cause it to happen.

The Law of Moses had nothing to do with our justification; the only justification that was available through the Law was a temporary one, one that God allowed so that the Law could be a sign post for us, pointing to the true justification through Christ.

God is not only the God of the Jews, but of all people, no matter what.

William Dunkerley, an English author from the late 1800s and early 1900s, wrote a hymn that goes along with Paul's statement that we're all equal in Christ, no matter who we are. The first stanza of that hymn goes like this:

In Christ there is no East or West,
In Him no South or North;
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.

Chapter three of Romans ends with a simple question; is the Law overthrown because of faith? And Paul's answer is a resounding no. We uphold the law, not because it justifies us, but because it is part of how we demonstrate that we have faith that we are justified.

If we could really follow the Law, Jesus wouldn't have had to be a sacrifice for us. But we don't meet the standard; we can't live up to God's example of Righteousness.

I may never publish a book, my poetry may never be published or recognized publicly, I may never win on "American Idol" or "The Voice". But I have been made righteous by accepting Jesus' sacrifice for my sins, and demonstrating my faith. I hope you have, too.

Galatians 3:23-29 (Closing)

²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.