

## Getting Romans Right

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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The latest Quarterly offers lessons on the book of Romans—the theological epicenter of New Testament. Just as God entrusted to His remnant church a special end-time emphases in prophecy, something else is extremely important for them: getting Romans right.

What could we get wrong in Romans? At least two points are immediately obvious: (1) What is sin? and (2) What is justification? Both of these doctrines have a long history of development after the time of the New Testament.

### **What is Sin?**

First, let's get sin right. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). This verse could be translated “For all have sinned and they are failing to receive the glory that God gives”; that is, they are choosing not to be conformed to His image. Some use this text to teach that no matter what we do, we cannot help but sin; we are always coming short. Man cannot truly obey; the best that he can do is to limp along in repeated failure.

It would be tragic were that the reality. But if so, we would have to accept it. This is God's Word, His Bible. What He says, goes; what He says is the truth.

But let's be careful before leaping to a conclusion. Actually, “glory” is spoken of no less than 15 times in the book of Romans. Let's take some samples. In Romans 2:6-11 there are two occurrences:

He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality (Romans 2:6-11). (Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard version.)

We are to seek for glory. There will be glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good.

Glory will be revealed in us according to Romans 8:18:

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (KJV).

Paul speaks of this glory as future. And yet, it *is* to be revealed in us.

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (Romans 9:22-24).

God wants to make known His power. He makes known the riches of His glory for vessels of mercy. Humans, although born with damaged natures, are all called to make known the riches of God's glory. When? We could not reveal His glory by our choices before we reach the age to choose intelligently for ourselves. Neither after we have been rewarded with glorified bodies and our damaged natures have been changed. Were our lives judged at that time, Satan could charge God with tampering with the evidence, for it will be much easier to obey when our disordered fallen humanity has been replaced with humanity that is like Adam's before his fall. Our characters will have been formed before then.

The only space left, then, to demonstrate the riches of His glory—how God can change damaged creatures into holy ones—is the space between our arrival at an ability to choose good or evil, and, the time of our personal close of probation, our life experience, after which we will receive what is fitting based upon what we did while we were here with what God gave us (2 Corinthians 5:10).

If we let Paul write what God inspires Him to, we must admit that:

1. We are to seek for glory now, in this life.

2. There will be glory for those who do good.

3. God's glory is to be revealed in us.

4. The space in time where God's glory is to be revealed in us is this life before our bodies have been changed. That is, especially while we have opportunity to make choices and yet still have fallen natures.

That is, we can, with God's power, do good. Our bent inclinations can be overcome.

Which brings us back to Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and come short [or "continue to come short"] of the glory of God." Because all have sinned, all need salvation, repair, transformation; we need a Savior, and only Jesus is able to represent us and intercede for us as our great high Priest. He can change us. He is as human as we are (Romans 1:3) and came and conquered sin in a human flesh like ours (Romans 8:3, 4). Yes, all of us have sinned, and that needs to change. All of us have engaged in struggle, experiencing not only victories, I am sure, but also repeated defeats. This all agrees with Romans 3:23. We have sinned and will always need Jesus' forgiveness of those sins and His righteousness accounted in our place, for we, by choice, have made ourselves sinners.

But this is not the whole story.

Romans chapters six through eight tell of a life of victory through Christ, of overcoming, transformation. Even Romans 12:1, 2 commands us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We are there told that our lives may become living sacrifices, and that this experience of doing battle with our developed sinful inclinations is our "reasonable service" (KJV). It becomes

obvious then. Our minds are capable of transformation; conformity to the world is a choice just as transformation into consistent Jesus-followers is a choice.

Indeed, the very glory that was manifest when our Father raised Jesus from the dead is to be seen in us (Romans 6:4). Can it be that with that glory in us, even that will not be effectual to change our “coming short” of the glory of God? Or, do you believe as I do? I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13)!

The summary of this, is that I will always need Jesus’ covering righteousness for the sins already committed in my past, but that while it is a serious battle to overcome sinful inclinations, still, through the grace of Christ the Christian is enabled to do good (Romans 2:10). How? He is no longer alone. He chooses the presence of Christ! He works out His own salvation, that is, he cooperates with God, but also, it is God who works in Him to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13; Galatians 2:20, 21).

All this is true; this life is our one opportunity to choose to glorify God. So why does Romans 3:23 use the language that “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”? The word “sinned” here is an aorist form. This form takes in an action as a whole, it views it as an occurrence at a point in time. And sin always occurs at a point in time, i.e., there is a place during the passage of time when the sin is executed. This is even true of sins of omission. In Romans, Paul is looking at the fact that each responsible adult has sinned, become a rebel by choice. All such need salvation through Christ.

Once one has thus sinned, he will always need for that sin to remain forgiven. Even when long past, even when we live day-by-day without choosing to sin, past sins need to remain covered by the atonement provided by our Father who gave Jesus so that we might not perish but

have eternal life (John 3:16). The word for “come short” (“are coming short”) is a necessary corollary here, for if we are looking at present or past choices to sin as a point in time, and the result of that sin from the perspective that we have described, then it would also be true that one always comes short of God's glory in the same sense. The one exception to all this is Jesus, who never sinned and thus never came short, and never needed or needs forgiveness.

In a nutshell then, sin is always a choice. It is to be overcome now in the present life.

This is pivotal to our understanding, because it radically impacts our understanding of what justification can be.

### **What is Justification?**

Let's turn now to justification. What is it? In the book of Romans Paul uses the word 13 times. You should also know that the meaning of this word (English: Justify, Greek, pronounced *deekeo*) is listed in Young's concordance as “To make or declare right.” Strong defines it as “To render just or innocent; justify, be righteous.” That is, both Young and Strong give two meanings for the word. One is *to declare or count as righteous*, the other is *to make actually righteous*. This becomes very interesting when we notice that—almost always—Protestants speak of its meaning as to be “counted righteous.” But let's study.

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified” (Romans 2:13).

Hearing God's Word does not make one righteous. The one who does the law—who acts in harmony with God's command—will be justified. Think about this. Which meaning logically fits? If one actually does the law, is he made right, or, is he actually not right yet declared to be right anyway? Is that factual? But when we say that the doer of the law is made righteous, God's

power to change us internally is seen to effect a factual, actual change. He asks for God's help. God supplies His help. Obedience to the law is manifest. The person has acted righteously—only because he cooperated with God who gave him power for obedience.

Romans 3:4 is Paul stating his desire that God would be justified in His words. Of course, in God's case, He already is righteous. Paul wants men to agree with God because God actually is righteous. His meaning here can hardly be that he wants men to count God as righteous even though He is not.

Romans 3:20 points out that no one will be justified by obeying God's law. If we say that the meaning is to be declared righteous by actually obeying the law, again we have a factual problem. If he is actually obeying, then he must be doing it in the only power by which we can truly obey—the power of God. If the power of God is working actively through him then he is actually being obedient. Then this cannot be merely declarative. The obedience is not make-believe or let's pretend, but actual godly obedience.

The other option is that Paul is saying that no one will be made right by obeying the law. This is true. Obeying God's law does not make us right; Obedience is a manifestation in one who is right, through whom God's power is working. The meaning, then, of "to make righteous" seems best to fit at 3:20.

Verses 3:24, 28, and 30 also fit into Paul's argument. They show that to experience justification is to receive the gift of Jesus, and that one is justified distinctly and separately from his works. Verse 30 says that God will justify Jews and non-Jews through faith. Paul says nothing here that limits justification to a mere "counting" right. His goal is to clarify the fact that faith is not empty, but when it is a God-given and man-acted-upon faith, it has an effective result.

There is no reason here not to conclude that the meaning of *deekeo* here is to make right. Thus, God “will make right the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” The same holds true for Romans 4:2.

Romans 4:5 is a text commonly presented in support of the teaching that justification in Romans means to “count” as righteous. But that is not the problem in Romans four. The question there is not *the nature of justification* so much as *how justification happens*. The example given is Abraham. Verse four shows that the wages that he who works for them receives are considered as they actually are—not as a gift but as wages. Verse five reverses the example but presents the same truth: He who does not work for justification but who receives it as a gift actually has justification—he has actual righteousness. This is not a fictional justification in any respect, else the recipient would not even be justified.

God does not impute or count what is not so; He speaks and it is so. Time prevents us today from further exploring this question in Romans five and eight. But there is nothing in any of these chapters in Romans to lead us to conclude that Paul is limiting justification to a mere countedness. Romans 4:12 points out that even the non-Jewish person, if he walk in the steps of his father Abraham, is of the faith of Abraham. So, this is actual walking, actual living. In the same way, to justify, in Romans, is not “to count righteous” but “to make righteous.”

### **Conclusion**

Men are not born into sin in Romans; they choose to sin. All have chosen it, thus, all need salvation. To sin is a choice.

Likewise, justification does not automatically mean, as some would have it, to count as righteous someone who has not been made actually righteous. If he maintains his connection

with God, he is, through that connection, made righteous. Understanding these questions puts us in a better position for getting Romans right.

**Biographical note:** Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.