

lesson five
JULY 24—31

Justification and the
Law

*“Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly
not! On the contrary, we establish the law”*

(Rom. 3:31, NKJV).



Gen. 15:6;
2 Samuel 11; 12;
Rom. 3:20–23, 31; 4:1–17;
Gal. 3:19;
1 John 3:4

Introduction

The Verdict: Life Sentence

It wasn't at all like a real courtroom. There was no prosecuting counsel preparing to make a final speech or defense attorney seeking to make one last appeal to the jury. There were just two men—David and Nathan: one powerful and well connected, the other a simple prophet with a verdict from God. David listened to all the evidence and heard the full extent of the charges. His conclusion was harsh: this serious offense deserved nothing less than the death penalty. What a shock, then, to learn that *he* was the guilty man.

**It is a promise from God with a lifetime guarantee
and no strings attached.**

Jerusalem's worst-kept secret was out! David's cunning attempts to hide his adultery with Uriah's wife led him to commit murder, then to attempt to pass off his victim as a casualty of war. What could he say in his defense? Caught red-handed, he couldn't even think about pleading ignorance. He knew that under God's law, adultery and murder were punishable by death. He was guilty as charged. All he could do was admit his sin and await the divine sentence.

However, the sentence was life, not death. "Nathan said to David, 'The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die' " (2 Sam. 12:13, NKJV). How could God put away David's sin? How could He speak a sentence of life when the law demanded death? Like David, we have all sinned. We all have ignored God's law and failed to meet His standards of righteousness. Consequently, we all face eternal death. Yet God can declare us righteous when we accept the death of His Only Son, Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away all sin. Our sin is now part of *His* story. That's why in Psalms 32 and 52, David speaks of the joy and sheer relief he felt when he experienced the undeserved blessing of forgiveness.

Could *you* use that sort of blessing? It is a promise from God with a lifetime guarantee and no strings attached. Sometimes when we feel far from God, we can think that our situation is hopeless. We stop trusting God's mercy. When God made Abraham a promise that seemed too good to be true, Abraham believed God, and God counted this faith as righteousness. That's how justification works. As a sinner expecting divine judgment, believe what God has promised and listen for the verdict: a sentence of life.

As you study this week's lesson, listen for God's voice declaring your righteousness in Him.

Logos
*Justification
and the Law*

Gen. 15:6;
2 Samuel 11; 12;
Rom. 3:20–23, 31; 4:1–17;
Gal. 3:19;
1 John 3:4

During Bible times, it was evident that a wealthy and important citizen would not be treated in a court of law the same way as an insignificant person. This was sometimes written into the statutes. For example, the ancient Code of Hammurabi stated that if a man knocked out the tooth of another citizen who was his equal, his own tooth should be knocked out. But if a man knocked out the tooth of a freed man, he is to pay a fine. If the victim was a vassal, it sufficed to pay a small fine.¹ Nobody expected strict justice in human tribunals, but the biblical writers were sure that God is a God of justice. Throughout the Bible, justice is a category of fundamental importance.²

The analysis of our human circumstance ends on a note of hopefulness.

The Problem (Rom. 3:24)

The problem in all religion is “How can sinful people be just (justified) before a holy God?” According to *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, *justification* is a “forensic term, opposed to condemnation. As regards its nature, it is the judicial act of God, by which He pardons all the sins of those who believe in Christ, and accounts, accepts, and treats them as righteous in the eye of the law, [that is] as conformed to all its demands. In addition to the pardon of sin, justification declares that all the claims of the law are satisfied in respect of the justified. It is the act of a judge and not of a sovereign. The law is not relaxed or set-aside, but is declared to be fulfilled in the strictest sense; and so the person justified is declared to be entitled to all the advantages and rewards arising from perfect obedience to the law (Rom. 5:1–10).”³

Faithful Solution (Rom. 3:24–28; 4:2–4)

The first three chapters of Romans argue that all people are guilty before God. No one who relies on his observance of the law will be declared righteous in the divine court. The law, as a moral revelation of righteousness, offers no hope; it testifies against us “so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Rom. 3:19, NRSV).

Yet the analysis of our human circumstance ends on a note of hopefulness. God has found a way to accomplish the mission of making us right before God, a righteousness that is separate from the law (Rom. 3:21, 22, 28).

Paul therefore insists that people are not justified by what they themselves do. He points to the example of Abraham, the great forebearer of the Jewish race, as one who was not justified by works (Rom. 4:2, 3). And of course, if

Abraham was not justified by works, then who could possibly be? Explicitly Paul says, “A man is not justified by observing the law”; indeed, “by observing the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16, NIV; see also 3:11).

God’s Solution and the Condition of the Promise (Rom. 4:1–17)

“Faith is the condition upon which God has seen fit to promise pardon to sinners; not that there is any virtue in faith whereby salvation is merited, but because faith can lay hold of the merits of Christ, the remedy provided for sin. Faith can present Christ’s perfect obedience instead of the sinner’s transgression and defection. When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Saviour, then, according to His unfailing promises, God pardons his sin and justifies him freely.”⁴

The Law in Its Rightful Place (Rom. 3:31)

Paul is quick to remind us that just because we are justified by faith, we cannot think to do away with keeping the Ten Commandments (the law). In fact, it is because we are now right before God (justified) that we are more than willing to live our lives according to God’s precepts, which are now written in our heart rather than on stones. Read Ezekiel 36:24–27.

“Righteousness is obedience to the law. The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account.”⁵

An Apparent Problem? (James 2)

Is there a problem, however, between Paul and James, in that, whereas Paul says quite plainly that justification is by faith and not by works, James holds that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24, NRSV)? Both Paul and James comment on Abraham’s act, but James chooses Abraham and Rahab as examples of people who were justified by works (James 2:21, 25).

“Paul and James agreed on justification by faith. While Paul addressed the fallacy of obtaining justification through works, James dealt with the equally dangerous concept of claiming justification without corresponding works. Neither works nor a dead faith lead to justification. It can be realized only by a genuine faith that works by love (Gal. 5:6) and purifies the soul.”⁶

1. L. W. King, trans., *The Code of Hammurabi*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp> (accessed August 31, 2009).

2. Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996).

3. M. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (Oak Harbor, Wash.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1897).

4. *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 366, 367.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 367.

6. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, 2nd ed. (Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), p. 137.

Testimony
Just As If I'd . . .

Rom. 3:20

“If a man could save himself by his own works, he might have something in himself in which to rejoice. . . . All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin; but that which is wrought through faith is acceptable to God.”¹

“The law and the gospel are in perfect harmony.”

“Without the law, men have no just conception of the purity and holiness of God or of their own guilt and uncleanness. They have no true conviction of sin and feel no need of repentance. . . . The hope of salvation is accepted without a radical change of heart or reformation of life. Thus superficial conversions abound, and multitudes are joined to the church who have never been united to Christ.² As a result, “Many try to break the mirror which reveals their defects, to make void the law which points out the blemishes in their life and character.”³

In not fully beholding the law (which is God’s very character), we make the law void. To make void means to take away the legal force of the law. But it does not stop there. If we make the law null and void, we reject everything that salvation offers us: God’s love, His grace, justification, and Jesus’ righteousness.

“Satan is continually at work to lessen man’s estimate of the grievous character of sin. And those who trample the law of God under their feet are doing the work of the great deceiver; for they are rejecting the only rule by which they can define sin, and bring it home to the conscience of the transgressor.”⁴

“The law and the gospel are in perfect harmony. Each upholds the other. In all its majesty the law confronts the conscience, causing the sinner to feel his need of Christ as the propitiation for sin.”⁵

“Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His.”⁶ Through faith in Him, we are Justified. . . . Just as if I’d never sinned.

REACT

Why does justification by faith require us to fully behold the law?

1. *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 364.
2. *The Great Controversy*, p. 468.
3. *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 219.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 240, 241.
6. *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

Rom. 3:21–31

Evidence

Faith and Obedience—A Present Continuous Tense

Within Christianity there seems to be a tug-of-war between salvation through faith and salvation through keeping the law. Many argue that the law was nailed to the cross and that we are saved by grace alone. This is seen in the fact that many Christians no longer worship on the seventh-day Sabbath (Saturday) but on Sunday. But then other people are so caught up in keeping the law that they miss the necessity of God's grace.

Love is lived out in actions.

The Bible is our primary source of evidence regarding this issue, and in Romans 3:21–31, it states that we are made righteous through faith in Christ. It also states us that although we are saved through faith, the law is still valid.

Further evidence that law and faith go together is found in John 3:16. Take time to read it now. This verse has been called by many the ticket to heaven, because it states the one thing we must do to be saved. To understand this verse more fully, let's consider it in its original language. In Greek, verbs have a present continuous tense—to “go on doing.” So the word *believes* here means “to keep on believing.” We see another example of this in John 20:31.

In the Gospels, we read about the many miracles Jesus performed. John refers to these miracles as signs (John 2:11). This suggests that the miracles have a greater meaning, for signs point to something beyond themselves. One of these signs is found in John 2, where Jesus turned water into wine. At first, we just see a miracle. But there is more to it than that. Jesus asked the servants to fill clay jars with water, jars whose water was used for ritual purification of the body. He then asked them to draw the water (which had turned to wine) from the jars. By this sign Jesus showed that He came to cleanse us from sin, that we are saved from the penalty of law (which is death), and that the law is not abolished. Throughout the Bible, the law establishes a need for grace; but now, in our lives, through our faith, we establish the law by keeping it. “If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (John 14:15, NKJV). Throughout the Scriptures, love is lived out in actions. Yes, we are saved by grace through faith. However, we need to live out our faith by showing our love for God through our actions.

REACT

1. How do we find the right balance between law and grace?
 2. What does it mean that Jesus fulfilled the law?
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How-to Passing the Test With God

John 15:16

Performance reviews. Evaluations. Exams. Our value seems to be determined by how much we can achieve, deliver, pass, and perform. Is it any different with God? It is true that God expects His people to deliver “results.” In fact, He has commissioned us to go and make disciples of all the world. But does this make us valuable to God?

If your friends aren’t interested in God, do you dump them and move on?

What would it be like to have a performance review with God? We may find that there’s only one question we need to answer: Do you believe that God has chosen you, and not you who has chosen God? (See John 15:16.) A “yes” answer changes everything. It changes your perspective from one in which you have to earn God’s love to one in which He just simply loves you—full stop. It takes you from a position in which you can do something to make your relationship right with God to one in which only God has, is, and will do something to restore your relationship with Him. Finally, you acknowledge that it is not your performance that has anything to do with it, but rather God’s performance.

So how can you live a life that reflects this perspective? It may be useful to ask these questions:

How many non-Christian friends do you have? Jesus was surrounded by people who were not considered to be religious. Can we say the same of our social network?

Do you make friends with people just to convert them? Friendship evangelism is becoming popular, but if your friends aren’t interested in God, do you dump them and move on? Jesus extended friendship to Judas knowing that he would betray Him. Do you set the same example in your friendships?

Do you judge others and their relationship with God based on your own expectations? The early church argued over what people had to do to be true followers of Jesus. Generally the answer was based on their own expectations rather than on God’s love and grace. Are we quick to judge others by our standards rather than by God’s?

REACT

God’s love and grace can seem unfair in a world that expects us to do something to get something. How can you show this same kind of grace and love to others?

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Opinion
Positively Vain

2 Cor. 3:18
James 1:23–25;

It's no accident that the Bible likens the law of God to a mirror. A mirror cannot change the way we look. It doesn't hold opinions, and it can't make judgments. Its function is just to show things as they are. It is therefore no surprise that when we desire to look our best, the first place we often go to is a mirror. Looking into a mirror, we consider our appearance, reflect on our demeanor, and ponder how others will perceive us. Having looked into the mirror, we come to recognize that in order to be our best, certain changes will need to be made. Here is where difficulty begins. We cover our blemishes, hide our imperfections, and worry about what people would think if they saw what we really look like.

The mirror of God's law . . . shows us . . . what we can be.

Sometimes it's exactly the same with the mirror of God. Often we genuinely desire to be what He wants us to be. But having looked in the mirror of His law, we are occasionally discouraged by the fact that we just don't measure up to His standard. We try to make ourselves clean, but on our own we can't remove the dirt left by sin. We try to mask our deficiencies, but the rain of life's hardships always washes our mask away. Looking in the mirror, we realize what we truly are—sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

But then there's the beauty of the gospel. Christ is willing to do for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. He has the power to justify us (make us right in the eyes of God), to make us new creatures where it really counts—on the inside. The mirror of God's law does not just show us as we are. It shows us (through the grace and power of Christ) what we can be. God's law tells us that He is merciful, forgiving, gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. His law shows us that by faith, this is how we can also be (Exod. 34:6, 7). God's law reveals not only our own character but, most important, reveals His; for only through His character, a character that endured the cross, can we be made right again. While the Bible counsels against vanity, the irony is that perhaps as Christians we *need* to look in the mirror. God's mirror, that is, and not our own.

REACT

1. What does justification and the law mean to you?
2. How can you apply God's law to your life without being legalistic?

Exploration *How to Be Right With God*

Rom. 3:21–31;
4:1–17

CONCLUDE

Human righteousness is all about God's work in us. It is not about what we do to be right with Him. Our Creator is our Redeemer taking upon Himself the act of reconciling and re-creating into His image sinful humans who repel His very nature. The law, then, is set before us to reveal a holy God and to mirror our own sinful image back to us—showing us how painfully short we fall from His image and hopes, and that we deserve His wrath. The law is also a moral compass pointing us to the intersection of God's saving grace through the sacrificial offering of Christ—His life for ours. That is how we are right with God—through His work *for* us and *in* us—if we put our faith in Him, and not in ourselves.

CONSIDER

- Doing a word study on the following: *justification, righteousness, transgressions, forgiveness, atonement, faith, and hope*. Use several sources, such as a regular dictionary, a Bible dictionary, and a Greek lexicon. Record your findings and keep them as you move through the next steps.
- Reading through Romans 3 and 4. Write down all the things we can do to be right with God. How many did you find? What are they? What characteristics has God described all of us as having? What standing, then, do we have with God? What attributes and actions does God consider as righteousness in us?
- Reflecting on your own relationship with Christ. What drew/draws you to Him? How did you come to know Him? How close and personal are you with Him? Is your relationship with God something personal, or is it related exclusively to your religious upbringing: attending church, following the rules and lifestyles of fellow Adventists—being traditionally and culturally a Christian Adventist, but without a personal, daily commitment to listening and responding to God?
- Journaling your personal experience of coming to know about Christ, falling into a relationship with Him, and how that relationship impacts you and is expressed in your life today.
- Creating a graphic artwork featuring one of the words from the word study (such as *hope, faith, forgiveness*) and putting that word together with one of the verses in Romans 3 or 4 that stood out for you.

CONNECT

Steps to Christ, “The Sinner’s Need of Christ,” pp. 17–22.

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