

Romans 3:21-22

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God has provided a way to be righteous in His sight apart from the law: by faith in Jesus Christ we are made righteous before God.

The phrase *apart from the law* is an incredibly pivotal phrase in Paul's defense of his good news message that is being slandered to the Roman believers by the competing Jewish "authorities." Paul's defense is likely meant to aid his ministry-allies Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18) who are now leaders in the (primarily Gentile) Roman church (Romans 16:3-5). They are combating the slander and hostility of Jewish "authorities" who want to add law-following to the message of faith alone in Jesus.

Paul argues that righteousness, or justice before God, has been made known to humanity through faith in Jesus Christ, *apart from the law*. He shows that this was foretold in the law: *Even the righteousness of God has been witnessed through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction* (v 22).

The competing Jewish "authorities" are arguing that Paul has overturned the law and made it something that should be broken (the competing Jewish "authorities" argue that doing so would be doing God a favor, according to Paul). Paul turns right around and says:

- The competing Jewish authorities are serial lawbreakers themselves (Romans 2:21–24)
- The law witnesses that righteousness does not come through the law, but apart from the law (Romans 2:21)
- The Prophets witness that righteousness does not come through the law, but apart from the law (Romans 2:21)

When Paul uses the terms *Law and the Prophets* he is referring to what we call the Old Testament Scriptures. *Law* sometimes refers to the entire Old Testament, but typically the Old Testament (which would have been all that was fully compiled at this time) was divided into three sections. These three sections included Law, Prophets, and Wisdom. The first five books would constitute the Law, the Prophets section would be found within the writings of the Prophets, and the Wisdom books would be Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes.

This phrase continues to verse 21, that *apart from the Law the justice or righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets*. He now equates the righteousness of God with the righteousness (or justice) that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. Here, Paul is getting to the crux of his defense against the slander of the competing Jewish "authorities" by claiming the very thing he asserted in the thesis statement in chapter 1, that righteousness (or just living) comes by only one way: faith. It begins with faith, and it manifests as a life lived by faith (Romans 1:16–17).

In the theme verse of Romans 1:16–17, Paul quoted the Old Testament book of Habakkuk, that “the just [or righteous] shall live by faith.” What the Prophets, including Habakkuk, already said is now being repeated by Paul: righteousness comes by faith. Paul emphasizes that this applies to everyone. *There is no distinction* (v 22) refers to the same issue that Paul has discussed all along, how God treats the Jews and Gentiles. The point is very clear; God treats them the same when it comes to righteousness. It only comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

The word translated *righteousness* is the Greek word “*dikaiosune*,” a word that Greek philosophers cared about greatly. In fact, this word is the key question in the pivotal Greek classic *The Republic* written by Plato, one of the two greatest Greek philosophers. “What is *dikaiosune*?” is the question asked and answered by Plato’s *Republic*. And Plato’s answer will be similar to Paul’s, but with a great difference. Plato answers that “*dikaiosune*” is achieved when each person in a city-state (like Athens) does what they do best, for the community.

Not a bad answer, since the idea of *righteousness* or “justice” in the context of living means “lining up” with the right or best way to live. It is hard to argue that community harmony, and everyone serving best with their gifts, is not a good path to that goal. In fact, Paul will tell us in chapter 12 that “*dikaiosune*” looks like a body where all the parts function in perfect harmony, and each part does what it does best for the rest of the body. Unlike Plato, Paul asserts that the only proper “head” to the body is Jesus Christ. So while they agree that *righteousness* is things working in harmony, Paul differs greatly from Plato when he asserts that the harmony must be according to God’s design, which includes Jesus as the head of the body. In fact, Jesus is the head of all creation (Colossians 1:16-17).

Paul recognizes that there is something twisted within humanity that stands in the way of living in perfect harmony with others. It is sin. Sin is living apart from God’s design. Sin is seeking to exploit rather than seeking to love.

Without having the power to overcome sin, we can never possess or practice “*dikaiosune*.” The *righteousness of God* can only come through *faith in Jesus Christ*. And that is available to anyone, for *all who believe*. This is true for all peoples, regardless of nationality, gender, age, or station; *for there is no distinction* on the basis of human categories or divisions. All are welcome, and whoever believes will be given eternal life (John 3:16).

Biblical Text

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;