

The Pleasure of God in Justifying the Wicked

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Romans 5:16 And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. 17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. 18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. 19 For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous (NASB).

In his excellent book *The Pleasures of God*, there is a section where John Piper argues that God takes pleasure in the death of the wicked. This section was so profound to me because it was so shocking: we wouldn't expect God to take pleasure in the death of anyone (cf. Ezekiel 33:11). Yet there is a sense in which he does take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Deuteronomy 28:63; Psalm 135:6-12). He does not delight in punishing the wicked in itself (God is not sadistic) but rather delights in it insofar as it vindicates His glory by executing the punishment that sin deserves.

What I would like to explore is the converse of this truth, which to me is no less shocking: the pleasure of God in the life of the wicked. Or, to be more specific, the pleasure of God in justifying the wicked. We know that God takes pleasure in justifying the wicked because Psalm 115:3 and 135:6 imply that God only does things which please Him. Romans 4:5 explicitly says that God "justifies the wicked." Therefore, God takes pleasure in justifying the wicked.

The problem is that in Proverbs 17:15 God says that he who justifies the wicked is an abomination to the Lord: "He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord." God, thus, hates it when people justify the wicked. How, then, can God do this very thing and not only be "just" as Romans 3:26 says (most of us probably know the answer to that) but actually delight in doing it?

What I would like to do towards this end is draw out a few diamonds from Romans 5:16-19. When we are done, we should be able to piece together all the pieces to see why God takes pleasure in doing the very thing that Proverbs 17:15 seems to say that He hates.

Christ's righteousness is the basis

First, notice that we are justified on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. Verse 17 says that as a result of receiving the "gift of righteousness" we have eternal life. Verse 18, in turn, refers to this "gift of righteousness" as an "act of righteousness" performed by Christ. The righteousness of Christ, therefore, is the ground of our justification. We'll come back later to get more specific about what this means.

Christ's righteousness is His obedience

Second, notice that the righteousness of Christ is specifically defined as His obedience. For what verse 17 calls the "gift of righteousness" and verse 18 calls the "one act of righteousness," verse 19 calls the "obedience of the one."

Christ's obedience is both active and passive

Third, notice that His obedience is here viewed as both the payment of the penalty for our sins and the positive fulfillment of the law's precepts. These two facets of His obedience are often called His active and passive obedience. The law of God requires that those who break it be punished (Romans 6:23, etc.) The passive obedience of Christ is His payment of this penalty. But the law of God also requires that its positive precepts be fulfilled (Galatians 3:10). It doesn't simply require that we never break it; it requires that we positively do all that it says. The active obedience of Christ is this positive fulfilling of the law that He accomplished while on earth.

It is hardly to be disputed that when Paul speaks of Christ's obedience here in Romans 5:19 he has in view the passive obedience of Christ. For by referring to it as the "one act" of righteousness Paul clearly shows that what he has in mind is the death of Christ—the crowning act of Christ's obedience. And just a few sentences ago in verses 9-11 Paul had spoken of Christ's death as reconciling us to God and removing the enmity—which clearly has in view primarily the removal of our sins. Paul, then, is surely viewing the death of Christ as the payment of the penalty for our sins.

But Paul is also in this passage viewing the death of Christ as something that perfectly fulfilled the positive requirements of the law—to love God and your neighbor—because he contrasts it here with the disobedience of Adam. Jonathan Edwards rightly points out from this: "What can be meant by righteousness, when spoken of as the opposite to sin, or moral evil, but moral goodness? What is the righteousness that is the opposite of an offence, but the behavior that is well pleasing? And what can be meant by obedience, when spoken of as the opposite of disobedience or going contrary to a command, but a positive obeying and an actual complying with the command?" (Edwards, "Justification by Faith Alone," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol I, 638). According to this text, then, the death of Christ (the "obedience of the one," which is the "one act of

righteousness") does not simply take away our sins, but supplies us with a perfect record of obedience before God.

The parallel in Philippians 2:6ff. confirms this, where we read that Christ "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." In Romans Paul spoke of Christ's obedience as "one act of righteousness," and here he says that Christ was "obedient to the point of death." This indicates that Paul sees Christ's death as the culmination of a life of obedience. Thus, it is not the only righteous thing Christ did and which justifies us, but is the culmination of His righteousness because it is the capstone of His obedience. For this reason Paul can speak of us as being justified by "one act of righteousness."

What is especially significant is that in the Philippians passage it is clear that Paul is not simply viewing the death of Christ as a fulfillment of the law's penalty. That is evident not only from the fact that it is referred to as "obedience" but because it is the ground of His exaltation. For to say, as Paul does here in Philippians, that Christ obeyed unto death and therefore God exalted Him is to view the death of Christ as an act of moral goodness that won exaltation. And so, likewise, in Romans 5 where Paul speaks of Christ's death as an act of righteous obedience and says that we are made righteous by it, he means that it is because of the moral goodness of Christ's obedience unto death that we are justified. He is, in other words, viewing the death of Christ as a perfect fulfillment of the positive precepts of the law.

Finally, that Paul is viewing the death of Christ as a positive fulfillment of the law's commands follows simply from the meaning of "righteousness." As John Piper argues in *The Justification of God*, righteousness in Paul means an unswerving commitment to uphold the glory of God. By calling the death of Christ "one act of righteousness," then, Paul is viewing it as an act of obedience which not only pays the penalty for our sins but also perfectly upholds and displays the glory of God's name—that is, positively fulfills the law (since this is what the law calls for).

This righteousness is imputed to us

Fourth, notice that this righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. Verse 18 loosely indicates this when it says that justification results from the righteous death of Christ; verse 19, however, gets more specific and explains how: it is "through the obedience of the one that the many will be made righteous." By the obedience of Christ (both active and passive, as we have seen) we will be made righteous. This is, in Paul, imputation language. Note, for example, the parallel in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." When Paul says that Christ was "made sin" he cannot mean that Christ was transformed into a sinner—that would be blasphemous. Neither can he simply mean that in some loose sense our sins resulted in Christ dying. Rather, he means that our

sins were imputed to Christ. He did not become inherently sinful, but was rather regarded as being guilty of our sins.

Likewise, therefore, when Paul says in Romans 5:19 that we are "made righteous" by the obedience of Christ, he must mean that this obedience of Christ is imputed to us. The term "made righteous" here might seem to imply that Paul is saying that we are made inherently righteous by the obedience of Christ. But the parallel usage of this term in 2 Corinthians 5:21 will not allow us to conclude this, since we have seen that when speaking of the death of Christ Paul uses terms like this to refer to imputation and not impartation. And so Paul means in Romans 5:19 that we are made righteous by imputation—not impartation. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, and we are thereby made legally (not inherently) righteous.

What needs to be emphasized is that since we have already seen that this obedience is both the payment of the penalty Christ made for our sins and His positive conformity to all the law's precepts, it follows that what is imputed to us is both the active and passive obedience of Christ. We must not divide the righteousness of Christ. Since Paul is viewing Christ's obedience here as both active and passive (as we have seen), what is imputed to us is not simply Christ's payment of the penalty for our but also His positive fulfillment of the law's commands.

Perfect obedience results in eternal life

Fifth, notice from this that a course of obedience perfectly fulfilled secures eternal life. For otherwise Christ's perfect obedience could not have secured our eternal life—as this text says that it does. This principle is what is called the "covenant of works." It doesn't mean that obedience earns justification from God by doing something for Him that He has not first given to us; rather, it simply means that God has promised to bestow eternal life on the ground of perfect obedience. If we deny this principle—the covenant of works—we are thereby denying that Christ's death secured our salvation.

Justice is at the foundation of our justification

Sixth, what this means is that eternal life is given to perfect obedience in justice and not grace. This does not mean that God did not empower the obedience or that the obedience did Him a favor that obligated Him. Rather, it means that since God has promised to bestow eternal life on perfect obedience, He must give eternal life to those who possess perfect obedience. To say that life is bestowed in justice instead of grace, then, means that God could not decide to withhold life from those who possess perfect obedience. If something is of grace, you can either give it or withhold it without committing an injustice; since God cannot (by His own decision to esteem the death of Christ as worthy of eternal life for all who receive it) withhold justification from perfect obedience, it is thus bestowed in justice and not grace.

One reason we know that perfect obedience secures life in justice is because if it did not then God could legitimately deny eternal life to someone who has the righteousness of Christ. But that is surely unthinkable. What a dishonor that would be to the Son! And so it is not sufficient to simply say that God will give eternal life to all who receive the imputation of His Son's righteousness; we have to say that God must give eternal life to all who receive the imputation of His Son's righteousness. Anything less would imply that God does not have to save us and that He does not have to honor the Son by granting what He won—namely, eternal life for all who possess His righteousness.

Justice, then, is at the foundation of our eternal life. We thus have strong security since God would be unjust to not give eternal life to those who believe and Christ is duly honored because we see that He must receive the reward of His sufferings—namely, eternal life for all those who receive His righteousness. We also are able to see more clearly the stark contrast that Paul makes between justification by works and justification by grace through faith in passages like Romans 4:4, 16. Justification by works is given in justice; justification by faith is given in grace. And since, of course, those who believe receive the righteousness of Christ their justification is ultimately on the ground of works (and thus in justice)—not their own works, but the works of Christ.

We should not think, then, that it is because of the fact that we believe that God would be unjust to withhold eternal life from us; rather, He would be unjust to withhold it from us because when we believe we receive the perfect obedience of Christ by imputation. We do indeed receive the obedience of Christ by grace when we believe—God does not have to give it to us because our faith is the instrument and not ground of receiving Christ's righteousness. But once we possess the perfect obedience of Christ He must grant eternal life to us because His righteousness is indeed the ground and not instrument of obtaining life.

This reveals one reason Paul is so adamant in contending for justification of sinners by faith instead of works—because if we are justified by works (obedience) that we do—even if in the power of God—, our justification would be given in justice for what we had done. The problem is that, in the case of sinners (though not the sinless, such as Christ), that leads to inappropriate boasting (Romans 4:2).

The righteousness of God is the righteousness of Christ

Seventh, if we move back to the parallel with 2 Corinthians 5:21 we see that the righteousness of God is the righteousness of Christ: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Just as Paul spoke in Romans 5:19 of us being made righteous by the obedience of Christ, so also in this text Paul speaks of us becoming the "righteousness of God in Him." Since the righteousness imputed to us in Romans 5:21 is the obedience of Christ and the righteousness imputed to us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 is called the righteousness of God, we must conclude that the obedience of Christ is the righteousness of God.

This is confirmed by the relationship between Romans 5:17-19 (which speaks of the obedience of Christ) and Romans 3:22 (which speaks of the righteousness of God). The language of 3:22 that the righteousness of God comes to us and does so through faith indicates that it is a righteousness that is imputed to us. Since Romans 5:17-19 says that the righteousness which is imputed to us is the obedience of Christ, the righteousness of God must be the obedience of Christ.

Likewise, then, when Paul simply says in passages like Romans 4:6 that God "reckons righteousness" to those who believe, these things indicate that he is speaking of the righteousness (active and passive) of Christ. Unless, of course, we want to say that there are two different righteousnesses imputed to us (or perhaps even three)—the "righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:22), "righteousness" (Romans 4:6) and the "righteous act of the One" (Romans 5:18-19).

Why God takes pleasure in justifying the wicked

It is probably evident where I am going with this. If God simply declared the wicked to be righteous without also making them legally righteous—that is, imputing righteousness to them—he would indeed be committing an abomination. For he would be violating Proverbs 17:15 by declaring those who are not really just to be just. But Romans 5:19, 4:6, 2 Corinthians 5:21, etc., show us that God's act of justification is not simply declarative, but constitutive. In other words, it God's declaration that we are righteous is based upon the real imputation of righteousness to us. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us and, consequently, we are declared righteous and set right with God. God is not, therefore, saying that the wicked are just when they are not (which is what Proverbs 17:15 opposes). Rather, He is making those who are inherently wicked to be legally (though not inherently) just such that His judgement that we are righteous accords with reality. It is not, therefore, an abomination to Him.

While this answers why justification is not an abomination to God, it does not answer why God would take pleasure in justifying wicked humans. But the answer is not hard to find: God takes pleasure in justifying the wicked because the righteousness that He imputes to them is the righteousness of His beloved Son, which perfectly reflects the worth of His glory.

It is at this point that it is extremely important to keep clear that it is on the basis of Christ's obedience that we are justified. Obedience—or righteousness—is that which, having been enabled by the power of God (1 Peter 4:11), perfectly reflects the moral greatness of God. By making obedience the ground of justification, therefore, God is justifying us on the basis of the reflection of His own moral worth and excellence. Consequently, when God justifies us He is testifying to the pleasure He takes in the surpassing worth of His glory. For by making His glory the basis for the supreme good of eternal life, He demonstrates that His own glory is itself a supreme good—otherwise it could not be the basis of something of such great value.

For example, if I received a medal for winning a race, that medal would be a testimony to the importance of winning that race. Likewise, since God bestows eternal life on the basis of a perfect reflection of his moral perfections in the creature (i.e., perfect obedience), eternal life is a testimony to the importance of God's glory. And just as an expensive medal testifies to the importance of winning a race more than a less valuable medal, so also the surpassing value of eternal life testifies to the surpassing value of the glory of God (since it is at the basis of that life).

We can even take this further. Since Christ is the embodiment of the glory of God at the foundation of our justification, when God justifies us He is testifying to the surpassing worth of and pleasure that He takes in His Son—who is the perfect reflection of His glory. God loves to justify the wicked, therefore, because in doing so He highlights the excellency of the worth of His Son, whom He loves and delights in. The justification of the wicked, then, is a testimony to the excellency of the Son of God. It is, therefore, a great delight to the heart of God.

Take courage and be glad that God is so delighted to justify you. And teach these things to others, for in doing so you will be not only exhorting them to take refuge in the pleasure of God in justifying the wicked in Christ, but will also be wonderfully manifesting the great delight that God takes in His Son and His glory.

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