

## ***Restoration, restoration, restoration!***

Continuing my mission to challenge ‘what I’ve always been taught’, can I ask what you think of by ‘God’s justice’? It’s difficult **not** to think about God punishing people for their sins, right? The technical term is ‘retributive justice’. I’d like us to consider an alternative: restorative justice – mainly because I now think that’s what the Bible talks about from end to end!

I was always taught that the solution to the problem of sin goes like this: by faith in Jesus’ death, we receive forgiveness and **thereby** we can be allowed to have a relationship with God. But unless we have our sins taken away through the cross there is nothing but estrangement from the holy God, i.e. we face hell.

That’s what I’ve always been taught. But I have come to believe it’s an unbiblical view.

What I now believe is that God doesn’t just ignore our sin, rather his solution is to come to us and offer us a place in his family; God tries to draw us into relationship with himself (this is in both OT and NT). By this very act of drawing us into relationship, God thereby ‘makes us just’, or justifies us.

But he can’t **force** us into that relationship; we have to come to him in faith and trust. This, I now believe, is the true meaning of ‘justification by faith’.

It’s through faith in Jesus, through trusting in Jesus, that we come into relationship with God and **thereby**, as a result, we receive forgiveness. Doesn’t it make more sense to have faith in a **person**, Jesus, rather than having faith in Jesus’ **action** in dying for us?

Does this metaphor help at all? Little Johnny has been playing in the mud in the back yard and he’s filthy. What does Mum say to him? ‘You’re not setting foot in this house until you get cleaned up. Stand underneath the outside tap [Johnny is only five, so the tap is high enough for him!] and get yourself cleaned up, and **then** you can come inside.’

Or does Mum rather put on an old apron, go outside, scoop him up into her arms, take him in and stand him in the sink and wash him down?

Only a metaphor, but it illustrates that the **relationship** comes **first** and **then** through the relationship comes the clean-up – not the other way around.

With that idea in mind, I’ve reread some of the Bible texts that talk about how Jesus’ death brings us back into relationship with God, and they make a lot more sense to me now.

To check this out, why don’t we have a look at the classic description of justification by faith – the book of Romans? So are you ready for me, in the second 500 words of this article, to sum up Paul’s teaching in Romans? :-)

The key is to realise that Romans was written to people **wanting** God’s judgement! They were religious people who wanted God to come in wrath and to punish the godless (Gentile) sinners, the Romans, who were oppressing them. Clearly, God had a choice: he could either punish the sinners (Hurray!) or ignore their sin (Boo!); to just ignore their sin would be grossly unfair!

But could there be a third way? Is it possible that God could restore us? Thankfully, yes, and that's why I'm so excited with the gospel these days:

*...he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:26)*

God's justice is not through punishment and violence but through restoration, and Paul's whole argument in Romans is that **not** punishing us is God's means of justice, restorative justice. When we say, 'I **want** not to sin', God says, 'You are free not to sin; draw close to me.' So God makes us righteous (or justifies us) by **relationship**, and that's Romans in a nutshell! God's goodness makes us good; it's **God's** goodness that rubs off on us, by relationship.

Paul's conversion was away from religious-based violence to relationship. As Saul, he thought that sin deserved punishment, and that's what he read his Bible (the Old Testament) to say. But when he was converted, he realised that retribution was **not** God's way – he had read his Bible (OT) totally wrongly and missed its overriding theme of God's **restoration**.

(I know, I know, when you read the OT, all you seem to see is God's punishment, but trust me – and maybe reread some of my earlier articles about wrath – that is **not** the overriding theme of the OT; rather it's about how God is desperately trying to draw people back into relationship.)

On the basis of 'what I've always been taught' I think of Paul's 'justification by faith' as meaning: I've sinned, I deserve punishment, God has provided a let-out clause, so I can avoid God's punishment, and I receive that justification by faith.

I now read 'justification by faith' as God forgiving me through a loving relationship with God-in-Jesus, and that's totally different – totally life-changing! It feels almost 'Damascus road' to me. That's why I walk around with a permanent grin on my face these days!

Post-conversion Paul read the Old Testament totally differently, not as God bringing retribution (in which, as Saul, he tried to lend God a hand), but as God bringing healing and restoration through our relationship.

So Romans is a very carefully argued treatise on how God's restorative justice trumps retributive justice.

Your homework: read Rom 1:16,17 and chapter 3 (especially 21–31) and see how totally different and more glorious it looks when you see the gospel as based on God's plan to restore humankind. I can now why they put Romans as the first of the letters; it gives such a careful exposition of God's plan through the whole of history to bring the good news of restoration!

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*(The above was inspired by chapter 2 of Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel'.)*