

Romans 3:20 Commentary

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Romans 3:20 [because](#) by the [works](#) of the [Law no * flesh](#) will be [justified](#) in His [sight](#); for [through](#) the [Law](#) comes the [knowledge](#) of [sin](#). ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: dioti ex ergon nomou ou dikaiouthesetai (3SFPI) pasa sarx enopion autou, dia gar nomou epignosis hamartias

Amplified: For no person will be justified (made righteous, acquitted, and judged acceptable) in His sight by observing the works prescribed by the Law. For [the real function of] the Law is to make men recognize and be conscious of sin [not mere perception, but an acquaintance with sin which works toward repentance, faith, and holy character]. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

KJV: Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

NIV: Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

NLT: For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what his law commands. For the more we

know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: No man can justify himself before God by a perfect performance of the Law's demands - indeed it is the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are. ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Wuest: Wherefore, out of works of law there shall not be justified any flesh in His sight, for through law is a full knowledge of sin.

Young's Literal: wherefore by works of law shall no flesh be declared righteous before Him, for through law is a knowledge of sin.

ROMANS ROAD to RIGHTEOUSNESS				
Romans 1:18-3:20	Romans 3:21-5:21	Romans 6:1-8:39	Romans 9:1-11:36	Romans 12:1-16:27
SIN	SALVATION	SANCTIFICATION	SOVEREIGNTY	SERVICE
NEED FOR SALVATION	WAY OF SALVATION	LIFE OF SALVATION	SCOPE OF SALVATION	SERVICE OF SALVATION
God's Holiness In Condemning Sin	God's Grace In Justifying Sinners	God's Power In Sanctifying Believers	God's Sovereignty In Saving Jew and Gentile	Gods Glory The Object of Service
Deadliness of Sin	Design of Grace	Demonstration of Salvation		
		Power Given	Promises Fulfilled	Paths Pursued
Righteousness Needed	Righteousness Credited	Righteousness Demonstrated	Righteousness Restored to Israel	Righteousness Applied
God's Righteousness IN LAW	God's Righteousness IMPUTED	God's Righteousness OBEYED	God's Righteousness IN ELECTION	God's Righteousness DISPLAYED
Slaves to Sin	Slaves to God			Slaves Serving God
Doctrine				Duty
Life by Faith				Service by Faith
Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " Jensen's Survey of the NT "				

BECAUSE BY THE WORKS OF THE LAW NO FLESH WILL BE JUSTIFIED IN HIS SIGHT: dioti ex ergon nomou ou dikaiothesetai (3SFPI) pasa sarx enopion autou:

- Ro 3:28; 2:13; 4:13; 9:32; Acts 13:39; Gal 2:16,19; 3:10, 11, 12, 13; 5:4; Eph 2:8,9; Titus 3:5, 6, 7; Jas 2:9,10
- Job 25:4; Ps 130:3; 143:2; Jas 2:20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26) (Job 15:15; 25:5
- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries
- [Romans 3:19-20: Why God Gave the Law](#) - Steven Cole
- [Romans 3:12-20 The Guilt of All Men, Part 2](#) - John MacArthur
- [Romans 3:20-31 False Elements Added to Salvation](#) - John MacArthur

THE LAW: A DIVINE "STRAIGHT EDGE"

J B Phillips paraphrase gives us a great word picture summary of the role of the Law in justification...

No man can justify himself before God by a perfect performance of the Law's demands - indeed it is **the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.**" (Phillips)

[Click](#) for an excellent discussion of the **PURPOSE OF THE LAW** by **William Newell**.

Purpose of the Law - Compare Ro 3:20, 5:20,7:7 Gal 3:19, 3:23-24 1Ti 1:9

Paul now declares what the Law **cannot do**, and then follows with an explanation of what it **can do**. First, he explains that no one will be **declared righteous** [justified] in God's sight by works of law ["doing right"] and second, that the business of God's Law is to make known to men their sin, and thereby, their need of a salvation which the Law cannot supply. As an aside, only after one has been declared righteous (and received a new heart and His Spirit) is it even possible to "do right."

Paul appears to be quoting from the Septuagint (LXX) of [Ps 143:2](#) (Expositor's Bible Commentary notes that Paul changes "the Greek text... from "**no man living**" to "**no flesh**" (NIV simply has "no one"), an alteration designed to bring out the frailty and inability of man with respect to meeting God's requirements." [Expositor's Bible Commentary](#))

Ps 143:2 (NASB) And do not enter into judgment with Thy servant, **for in Thy sight no man living is righteous.**

Septuagint (LXX) hoti ou dikaiouthesetai (3SFPI) enopion sou pas zon (PAPMSN)

English of the LXX: "**for in thy sight shall no man living will be justified.**"

Spurgeon commenting on **Psalms 143:2b** says

None can stand before God upon the footing of the law. In this verse David (a Jew who was righteous by faith) told out the doctrine of universal condemnation by the Law long before Paul had taken his pen to write the same truth. To this day it stands true: no man living may dare to present himself for trial before the throne of the great King on the footing of the law. This foolish age has produced specimens of a pride so rank that people have dared to claim perfection in the flesh; but these boasters are no exception to the rule here laid down: they are but human, and poor specimens of humanity. When their lives are examined they are frequently found to be more faulty than the humble penitents before whom they vaunt their superiority. (Treasury of David).

Because ([1360](#)) (**dioti**) is a conjunction used to indicate why something just stated can be reasonably considered valid (See value of recognizing and pausing to ponder the terms of explanation). Paul is explaining why the Law silences **everyone** and makes **everyone** accountable to God rather than liberating us. His explanation crushes any argument that perhaps a few exceptionally zealous people might live up to the perfect standard of God's Law. The fact is that doing perfectly what God's moral law requires is impossible.

James Denney writes that Paul uses **because** with the sense that...

Every mouth must be stopped, and all the world shown to be liable to God's judgment, because by the works of law no flesh shall be justified before Him. This last proposition -- that no flesh shall be justified in this way -- is virtually an axiom with the Apostle; it is a first principle in all his spiritual thinking, and hence everything must be true which can be deduced from it, and everything must take place which is required to support it. Because this is the fundamental certainty of the case, every mouth must be stopped, and the strong words quoted from the law stand where they do to secure this end... By the law comes the full knowledge of sin (epignosis). **This is its proper and indeed its (the Law's) exclusive function.** There is no law given with power to give life, and therefore there are no works of law by which men can be justified. **The law has served its purpose when it has made men feel to full how sinful they are; it brings them down to this point, but it is not for it to lift them up.** The best exposition of the passage is given by the Apostle himself in Gal 2:15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21ff, where the same quotation is made from Ps 143:2 (see Gal 2:16) and proof given again that it applies to Jew and Gentile alike. ([Expositor's Greek Testament](#))

John MacArthur - There is no salvation through the keeping of God's law, because sinful man is utterly incapable of doing so. He has neither the ability nor the inclination within himself to obey God perfectly. ([MacArthur, J: Romans 1-8. Chicago: Moody Press](#))

WORKS OF THE LAW

AND

JUSTIFICATION

Works ([2041](#)) (**ergon**) means a deed or action in contrast to inactivity. It speaks of toil or effort in which one exerts strength or faculties to do or perform something. Works are the **result** of and never the **means** of salvation (as is made very clear in Eph 2:8-9 = Way of Salvation and Eph 2:10 = Works of Salvation).

Works insufficient to Secure Salvation - Mt 7:22-23, Ro 3:20, Ro 9:32, Ro 11:6 Gal 2:16 Eph 2:8, 2:9 2Ti 1:9 Titus 3:4, 3:5

Trusting in works - Lk 18:12 Ro 9:32, 10:3 Gal 3:10

Denny notes that by the works of the law refers...

primarily (to) the Mosaic law. As Lipsius remarks, no distinction is drawn by the Apostle between the ritual and the moral elements of it, though the former are in the foreground in the epistle to the Galatians, and the latter in that to the Romans. But the truth would hold of every legal dispensation, and it is perhaps to express this generality, rather than because *nomos* (law) is a technical term, that the article ("ho" = "the") is omitted. Under no system of statutes, the Mosaic or any other, will flesh ever succeed in finding acceptance with God. Let mortal man, clothed in works of law, present himself before the Most High, and His verdict must always be "Unrighteous". (Expositor's Greek Testament)

No flesh (pasa sarx) in Greek is literally "all flesh". A literal rendering of this verse is therefore "*not justified all flesh*". And so to make the translation less cumbersome, most versions translate it as "no flesh", "no person", "no man", etc.

It is interesting to note that the identical Greek phrase, **pasa sarx**, is used 17 times in the Septuagint (LXX) (the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT - Ge 6:12; 7:21; 8:17; 9:11; Job 34:15; Ps 65:2; 145:21; Isa 40:5, 6; 49:26; 66:16, 23; Ezek 20:48; 21:5, 7; Da 4:12; Zech 2:13), the first use somewhat paralleling Paul's portrait of all mankind in Romans 3. In Genesis Moses writes that

God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for **all flesh** (*pasa sarx*) had corrupted their way upon the earth. ([Ge 6:12](#))

The point is that Paul's Jewish readers (whose "Bible" at the time of Jesus was primarily the Septuagint Translation) would have been very familiar with Paul's choice of phrases.

To avoid confusion, please remember that Scripture uses **justify** with a different meaning than the use in our modern culture. For example, we've all "justified" inappropriate behavior by producing any number of reasons to demonstrate and explain that we were right in how we acted. This is not the way "justify" is used in the NT. Fallen man can never do anything in order to pay or atone for his sinfulness (to justify himself) and be set free from the sentence of guilt and condemnation that is upon him. No man, however virtuous, can be justified by law keeping ("works of the law").

Also it should be understood that in the New Testament the verb **dikaioo** never means to make anyone righteous or to do away with his violation of the law, by himself bearing the condemnation and the imposed sentence. In the NT, man in his fallen condition can never do anything in order to pay for his sinfulness and thus be liberated from the sentence of guilt that is upon him as it happens in the world. For example when a guilty person has paid a fine or other penalty for a crime, by doing thus he is freed from condemnation. Man cannot pay a fine for his sin debt. We owed a debt we could not pay. God paid for a debt He did not owe. That's amazing... grace!

In theory perfect fulfillment of the Law of God could provide the basis of justification in the sight of God. However, as Paul has already demonstrated there is no man who has fulfilled this strict requirement.

James adds that even if a man

keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. (Jas 2:10, cp Ga 3:10, Mt 5:19, Dt 27:26)

So first let's study the meaning of this important Greek verb **dikaioo**.

Justified ([1344](#)) (**dikaioo** from **dike** = expected behavior or conformity, not according to one's own standard, but according to an imposed standard with prescribed punishment for nonconformity) means to show or declare the rightness of something or someone. As used in this passage **dikaioo** means to be declared righteous before God or to be justified, the process being referred to as justification.

Note: Click here for the main discussion of **dikaioo**. There is some repetition in an attempt to be certain to convey the meaning of this important verb **dikaioo**. However, this discussion is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the verb **dikaioo** or of the doctrine of justification. For a more exhaustive treatment I would recommend Dr **Wayne Grudem's** work, [Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine \(IVP; Zondervan, 1994\)](#). The following quote is taken from his book and emphasizes the crucial importance of an accurate understanding of **dikaioo** and the **doctrine of justification**. Grudem writes that...

A right understanding of **justification** is absolutely crucial to the whole Christian faith. Once Martin Luther realized the truth of justification by faith alone, he became a Christian and overflowed with the new-found joy of the gospel. The primary issue in the Protestant Reformation was a dispute with the Roman Catholic Church over justification. If we are to safeguard the truth of the gospel for future generations, we must understand the truth of justification. Even today, a true view of justification is the dividing line between the biblical gospel of salvation by faith alone and all false gospels of salvation based on good works. ([Systematic Theology](#))

(Bolding added)

MacArthur - "**Justification** is God's declaration that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. **Justification** is a wholly forensic, or legal, transaction.

Justification changes the judicial standing of the sinner before God.

In justification, God imputes (credits) the perfect righteousness of Christ to the believer's account, then declares the redeemed one fully righteous. **Justification** must be distinguished from **sanctification**, in which God actually imparts Christ's righteousness to the sinner (**Ed**: Progressively, day by day, for the remainder of a saved sinner's life on earth). While the two must be distinguished, justification and sanctification can never be separated. God does not justify whom He does not sanctify (**Ed**: Stated another way, faith alone saves [justifies], but the faith that saves is never alone [it is associated with sanctification - which speaks NOT of perfection but of one's direction, "heaven ward" not "hell ward!")." ([MacArthur, J: Romans 1-8. Chicago: Moody Press](#))

Dikaioo - 39 times in NAS, most often in Romans - acknowledged... justice, 1; acquitted, 1; freed, 3; justified, 24; justifier, 1; justifies, 2; justify, 4; vindicated, 3;

Mt. 11:19; 12:37; Lk. 7:29, 35; 10:29; 16:15; 18:14; Acts 13:38, 39; Rom. 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33; 1 Co. 4:4; 6:11; Gal. 2:16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4; 1 Tim. 3:16; Titus. 3:7; Jas. 2:21, 24, 25)

Dikaioo - 28 times in the Septuagint (LXX) -

Ge 38:26; 44:16; Ex 23:7; Deut 25:1; 2Sa 15:4; 1Ki 8:32; 2Chr 6:23; Esther 10:3; Job 33:32; Ps 19:9; 51:4; 73:13; 82:3; 143:2; Isa 1:17; 5:23; 42:21; 43:9, 26; 45:25; 50:8; 53:11; Jer 3:11; Ezek 16:51f; 21:13; 44:24; Mic 6:11; 7:9)

Dikaioo was a legal term in the Greek culture and was used to describe a judge declaring an accused person **not guilty** and therefore **innocent before the law**.

In Scripture **dikaioo** refers to God as Judge declaring a sinner not guilty and fully righteous before Him by imputing (reckoning, placing on one's account) to him the divine righteousness of Christ and imputing man's sin upon the sinless Lamb of God Who bore the punishment of death that all mankind deserved.

Justification changes the judicial standing of the sinner before God. The one justified is free from all ground of condemnation and is pronounced "**righteous**". You need to understand that to be justified does not mean that God **made** us righteous, but that He **declared** us righteous. He put the righteousness of Christ on our record in the place of our own sinfulness. And nobody can change this record.

In summary as used in the present context **dikaioo** signifies to declare a person to be right before God and to treat him as in right standing.

Every believer should know what it means to be "**justified**." This describes the gracious act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous through the merits of Jesus Christ. Justification never changes. Once God has declared you righteous, your standing before Him is settled for eternity. However, your daily walk is quite another matter. This changes as we yield to the Spirit and obey His Word. (see study of Three Tenses of Salvation)

Wuest using simple, non-technical language explains that **dikaioo** "refers to the act of God removing the guilt and penalty of sin from a sinner who places his faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour and the bestowal of the positive righteousness of Jesus Christ, in Whom that believer stands a righteous person before God's law for time and eternity, all this made possible by and based upon the satisfaction (propitiation) which Jesus Christ offered on the Cross as a complete payment of the penalty imposed by the law because of human infractions of that law, thus satisfying His justice, maintaining His government, and making possible the bestowal of mercy upon the basis of justice satisfied." All this is not possible by "**works of the law**"!

Constable notes that "Salvation by works rests on keeping the Mosaic Law. This does not mean that the Mosaic Law required works for salvation but that those who hope to earn salvation by their works look to the Mosaic Law as what God requires. God's gift of salvation, however, rests on a different law (principle) that God has also ordained and revealed. This "law" is that salvation becomes ours by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is what God requires, not works." ([Romans 3 Commentary](#))

Paul, explaining why there is no place for human boasting in the plan of salvation, reiterates "that a man is **justified** by faith apart from **works of the Law**." (see Ro 3:28-note)

Mounce comments that "One would think that the sinner would love to be forgiven at no cost. Unfortunately that is not the case. After all, sinners have their pride. They desperately want to claim some role in their own redemption. Unacceptable, says God." ([Mounce, R. H. Vol. 27: Romans. The New American Commentary. page 38](#))

Luke writes that through Christ "everyone who believes is **freed (dikaioo)** from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses." (Acts 13:39)

This verse might suggest that the Law could justify "SOME" things but through Christ come justification from all things. That is not what he is teaching. What Paul is saying here is that through faith in Christ a man can be justified from every charge of guilt that might be brought against him—a clearance that could never be obtained under the law of Moses.

Paul addressing Peter who was not practicing the gospel of grace (because he was apparently fearful of the Judaizers - those who advocated for example faith plus circumcision) clearly states that "a man is not **justified** (reckoned righteous and in right standing with God) by the **works of the Law** but (only) through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be **justified** by faith in Christ, and not by the **works of the Law**; since by the **works of the Law** shall no flesh be **justified**." (Gal 2:16)

Keeping the law is a totally unacceptable means of salvation because the root of sinfulness is in the fallenness of man's heart, not his actions. The law served as a mirror to reveal sin, not a cure for it. The law condemned to death those who failed to obey it perfectly. This brought the curse on all, because all have broken its holy precepts.

Writing again to the Galatians Paul asked "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the **works of the Law**, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal 3:1-3-note)

The actions of the Galatian saints exhibited a lack of understanding and reason. It is folly to mix works of the Law and grace, the work of God. To turn to law from grace is to be bewitched and to behave as if under some kind of spell and unable to use one's rational mind. One question should be sufficient to settle the whole matter. Let them go back to the time of their conversion—the time when the Holy Spirit came to dwell in their bodies. How did they receive the Spirit? By doing, or by believing? Obviously it was by believing. No one ever received the Spirit by keeping the law. Thus Paul appealed to the Galatians' own salvation to refute the Judaizers' false teaching that keeping the law ("**works of the Law**") is necessary for salvation.

Paul asked the Galatians again "Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the **works of the Law**, or by hearing with faith?" (Gal 3:5-note)

The answer is clear that God did not perform them because the Galatians did something special ("**works of the Law**") to earn them. He gave them freely in response to their believing the gospel.

Appealing to the testimony of the OT Scriptures Paul shows that even in the OT God clearly stated that **the works of the Law** could not justify a man. Only faith can **justify**. He writes that "as many as are of the **works of the Law** [who are seeking to be justified by obedience to the Law] are under a curse (and doomed to disappointment and destruction); for it is written (and stands written in Deut 27:26), "Cursed (accursed, devoted to destruction, doomed to eternal punishment) is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the **law**, to perform them (total and perfect obedience is demanded by the law and required by God and is thus impossible). Now that no one is **justified by the Law** before God is evident; for, "The righteous man (**the justified man**) shall live by faith." (Gal 3:10-11-note).

And again **Paul** says "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be **justified by law**; you have fallen from grace." (Gal 5:3-4)

John MacArthur states that "The word for "fallen" means "to lose one's grasp on something." Paul's clear meaning is that any attempt to be **justified by the law** is to reject salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Those once exposed to the gracious truth of the gospel, who then turn their backs on Christ and seek to be **justified by the law** are separated from Christ and lose all prospects of God's gracious salvation. Their desertion of Christ and the gospel only proves that their faith was never genuine" ([The MacArthur Study Bible](#))

In **Romans 4** Paul reiterates this truth stating that "the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the **Law**, but through the righteousness of faith." (Ro 4:13-note)

God gave His promise to bless the Gentiles through Abraham long before He gave the Mosaic Law. Consequently it was wrong for the Jews to think that the blessing of the Gentiles depended on their obedience to the Law.

In **Romans 9** Paul states that "Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness (right standing with God), did not arrive at that **law**. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were **by works** [they did not depend on faith but on what they could do].

They stumbled over the stumbling stone." (Ro 9:31-32-note).

Spurgeon...

There is no righteousness of works on the face of the earth. The law 'itself describes men as being sinful from their throat to their feet. Almost every member of the body is mentioned and described as being foul with sin. But, says Paul, there is another righteousness on the face of the earth, and that is the righteousness of God's grace, which comes through believing in Christ.

The law can convict and condemn, but it can never justify the guilty. Its special work is to prove that they are not justified in sinning, and to stop their mouths from uttering any excuse for their sin.

All the law does, is to show us how sinful we are. Paul has been quoting from the sacred Scriptures; and truly, they shed a lurid light upon the condition of human nature. The light can show us our sin; but it cannot take it away. The law of the Lord is like a looking-glass. Now, a looking-glass is a capital thing for finding out where the spots are on your face; but you cannot wash in a looking-glass, you cannot get rid of the spots by looking in the glass. The law is intended to show a man how much he needs cleansing; but the law cannot cleanse him. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." The law proves that we are condemned, but it does not bring us our pardon.

Some fancy that they have done a great many good works. In cherishing that delusion, they are like a Hindu of whom I once heard. He believed that he must not eat any animal substance, and that if he did he would perish. A missionary said to him, "That idea is ridiculous. Why, you cannot drink a glass of water without swallowing thousands of living creatures." He did not believe it, so the missionary took a drop of water and put it under a microscope. When the man saw the innumerable living creatures in the drop of water, he broke the microscope. That was his way of settling the question.

So when we meet with persons who say, "Our works are pure and clean and excellent," we bring the great microscope of the law of the Lord, and we bid them look through that. When they do look through it and discover that even one sinful thought destroys their hope of salvation by self-righteousness, and when they see a whole host of sins in one of their prayers or acts or thoughts, then they are angry with the preacher. They try to break the microscope! But for all that, the truth remains, "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

Thompson Chain Reference Justification

By Faith - Ge 15:6 Acts 13:39 Ro 3:28, 5:1, 5:18, 9:30 1Co 6:11 Gal 3:24

Justification by faith - Hab 2:4 Ro 4:3, 5:1 Gal 3:6 Php 3:9 He 10:38, 11:4

Justification of Self, Impossible - Job 9:2, 25:4 Ps 143:2 Jer 2:22 Ezek 14:14 Ro 3:20 Gal 5:4

Justification of Self Attempted, To Justify Wrongdoing

- By Adam for eating the forbidden fruit - Ge 3:12
- Aaron for making the golden calf - Ex 32:24
- King Saul for usurping the function of the priest - 1Sa 13:12
- also for keeping the forbidden spoil - 1Sa 15:21
- Sin absolutely inexcusable - Ro 1:20

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary - [Justification](#)

Torrey's Topic Justification before god

- Promised in Christ -Isaiah 45:25; 53:11

- Is the act of God -Isaiah 50:8; Romans 8:33

UNDER LAW

- Requires perfect obedience -Leviticus 18:5; Romans 10:5; 2:13; Jas 2:10
- Man cannot attain to -Job 9:2,3,20; 25:4; Psalms 130:3; 143:2; Ro 3:20; 9:31,32

UNDER THE GOSPEL

- Is not of works -Acts 13:39; Romans 8:3; Galatians 2:16; 3:11
- Is not of faith and works united -Acts 15:1-29; Ro 3:28; 11:6; Ga 2:14-21; 5:4
- Is by faith alone -John 5:24; Acts 13:39; Romans 3:30; 5:1; Galatians 2:16
- Is of grace -Romans 3:24; 4:16; 5:17-21
- In the name of Christ -1 Corinthians 6:11
- By imputation of Christ's righteousness -Is 61:10; Je 23:6; Ro 3:22; 5:18; 1Co 1:30; 2Co 5:21
- By the blood of Christ -Romans 5:9
- By the resurrection of Christ -Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:17
- Blessedness of -Psalms 32:1,2; Romans 4:6-8
- Frees from condemnation -Isaiah 50:8,9; 54:17; Romans 8:33,34
- Entitles to an inheritance -Titus 3:7
- Ensures glorification -Romans 8:30
- The wicked shall not attain to -Exodus 23:7

BY FAITH

- Revealed under the Old Testament age -Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17
- Excludes boasting -Romans 3:27; 4:2; 1 Corinthians 1:29,31
- Does not make void the law -Romans 3:30,31; 1 Corinthians 9:21

Typified -Zechariah 3:4,5

Illustrated Luke 18:14

Exemplified

- Abraham -Genesis 15:6
- Paul -Philippians 3:8,9

FOR THROUGH THE LAW COMES THE KNOWLEDGE OF SIN: *dia gar nomou epignosis hamartias*:

- Ro 7:7, 8, 9; Gal 2:19
- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries
- [Romans 3:19-20: Why God Gave the Law](#) - Steven Cole
- [Romans 3:12-20 The Guilt of All Men, Part 2](#) - John MacArthur
- [Romans 3:20-31 False Elements Added to Salvation](#) - John MacArthur

IF BY THE WORKS OF THE LAW NO ONE IS JUSTIFIED, WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW?

For (*gar*) is a causative particle standing always after one or more words in a clause and expressing the reason for what has been before, whether it is affirmed or implied. Whenever you see a "**for**" stop and ask why is it there for? Here Paul explains that although the Law cannot save, it nevertheless does have a purpose and specifically the Law makes sin known for exactly what it is... SIN!

In Galatians **Paul** adds "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. (Gal 2:19note)

Through ([1223](#)) (*dia*) conveys the sense of instrumentality, so that "through the instrument of the Law" is the sense.

Law ([3551](#)) (*nomos*) (see summary of the Purpose of the Law) is etymologically something parceled out, allotted, what one has in

use and possession; hence, usage, custom. In context **nomos** is analogous to Hebrew **torah** or law which means teaching or direction. ([Click](#) for an excellent discussion of the purpose of the Law by William Newell) [click](#) for purpose of the Law illustrated)

Keep in mind when you see the term "**law**" (nomos) in the NT, that this word is used in several different ways so that you need to check the context. For example, law can sometimes refer to legalism in which one trusts in their own efforts to perform up to the level of divine morality (cp Lk 18:9). Sometimes **law** refers to the commandments and ceremonial rituals prescribed by God in the Old Covenant. Other times **law** refers simply to divine standards in general. The **law** can also refer to the entire body of Scripture that we now call the Old Testament.

As **Godet** says "Far from having been given to sinful man to furnish him with a means of justification, the law was rather given to help him in discerning the sin which reigns over him... Judaism was living under a great illusion, which holds it to this very hour, to wit, that it is called to save the Gentile world by communicating to it the legal dispensation which it received through Moses. "Propagate the law," says the apostle, "and you will have given to the world not the means of purifying itself, but the means of seeing better its real corruption. (Godet, F. Commentary on Romans).

It was Martin Luther who said that the function of Law is not to **justify** but to **terrify**.

Bishop Moule has expressed it

The law has driven in upon the soul of man, from many sides, that one fact—guilt; the eternity of the claim of righteousness, the absoluteness of the holy will of God, and, in contrast, the failure of man, of the race, to meet that claim and do that will. It has told man, in effect, that he is 'depraved' (depravatus; twisted, wrenched from the straight line), that is to say, morally distorted. He is 'totally depraved,' that is, the distortion has affected his whole being, so that he can supply on his own part no adequate recovering power which shall restore him to harmony with God. And the law has nothing more to say to him, except that this condition is not only deplorable, but guilty, accountable, condemnable; and that his own conscience is the concurrent witness that it is so. Man is a sinner. To be a sinner is before all things to be a transgressor of the law. It is other things besides. It is to be morally diseased, and in need of surgery and medicine. It is to be morally unhappy, and an object of compassion. But first of all it is to be morally guilty, and in urgent need of justification, of a reversal of sentence, of satisfactory settlement with the offended—and eternal—law of God.

Expositor's Bible Commentary concludes that "The practical result of working seriously with the law is to "become conscious of sin" (cf. Ro 5:20; 7:7, 8, 9, 10, 11). How startling it is to contemplate the fact that the best revelation man has apart from Christ only deepens his awareness of failure. The law loudly proclaims his need for the gospel." ([Gaebelein, F. Editor: Expositor's Bible Commentary 6-Volume New Testament. Zondervan Publishing](#))

In a later chapter Paul offers a further explanation of the **purpose of the Law**, writing "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died." (Romans 7:7-9)

Wayne Barber paraphrases Paul as saying in essence that upon reading the Law

"I found out that what I was doing was called **coveting** because the **Law** brings **knowledge to sin**. So I woke up the next day and I said, 'I am not supposed to **covet**. I am going to please you, God. I am not going to **covet**.'" What did he do all day long? Covet, covet, covet. Why? Because no man by his sinful heart can measure up to that **law**. All men are under it and all men just need to shut up. If you have been guilty of breaking one of them, you are guilty of the whole law." (Notes on Romans)

Paul explains that the **Law has another purpose** in that

"before faith came, we were kept in custody (kept under lock and key - imperfect tense indicates the continued activity of the law as a jailer) under the **law**, being shut up to (with a view to the exercising of faith) the faith which was later to be revealed (the Law functioned as a jailer who held in custody those who were subjected to sin, in order that they should not escape the consciousness of their sins and their liability to punishment). Therefore the **Law** has become our tutor (literally "a child leader" or a guardian that kept watch over us until we came to Christ) to lead us to Christ, that we may be **justified** by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor." ([Gal 3:23-24](#))

In short, Paul personifies the Law as a **jailer** and as a **tutor**.

Thus the Law kept guilty, condemned sinners, on death row awaiting God's judgment. They were fenced in by the law's requirements, and since they could not fulfill these, they were restricted to the way of faith for salvation. The people under law were thus confined until the glorious news of deliverance from the bondage of the law was announced in the gospel. Secondly, the Law functioned as like a **"tutor"** who escorted children to and from school and watched over their behavior at home. Tutors were often strict disciplinarians, causing those under their care to yearn for the day when they would be free from their tutor's custody. The law was our **tutor** which, by showing us our sins, was escorting us to Christ.

The law was never intended to save or sanctify. Knowledge of sin comes through the law. As discussed above, no one can ever be justified by keeping the law. Paul's statement is as clear as one could desire. One of the greatest enigmas of human experience is the continuing persuasion of most religious people that a man can somehow make himself acceptable to the holy God through the observance of law, ritual, and moral precept, whereas the great missionary-theologian goes to great length to refute that idea. And this same fallacy sneaks into the life of genuine believers who somehow think they need to "do" for God (in order to please Him and become acceptable to Him) rather than simply "being" (and obeying). We must continually recall to our minds the truth Paul expounded to the saints at Colossae -- we are complete in Christ. We cannot become more righteous than He is... by faith and obedience we now need to "work out" that truth in day to day experiences, trials, etc

Spurgeon commenting on **"By the law is the knowledge of sin"** writes that...

Some fancy that they have done a great many good works. In cherishing that delusion, they are like a Hindu of whom I once heard. He believed that he must not eat any animal substance, and that if he did he would perish. A missionary said to him, "That idea is ridiculous. Why, you cannot drink a glass of water without swallowing thousands of living creatures." He did not believe it, so the missionary took a drop of water and put it under a microscope. When the man saw the innumerable living creatures in the drop of water, he broke the microscope. That was his way of settling the question.

So when we meet with persons who say, "Our works are pure and clean and excellent," we bring the great microscope of the law of the Lord, and we bid them look through that. When they do look through it and discover that even one sinful thought destroys their hope of salvation by self-righteousness, and when they see a whole host of sins in one of their prayers or acts or thoughts, then they are angry with the preacher. They try to break the microscope!

But for all that, the truth remains, "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."

Knowledge (1922) (**epignosis**) means a clear and exact knowledge.

Vincent says that **epignosis** always speaks "of a knowledge which powerfully influences the form of the religious life, and hence containing more of the element of personal sympathy than the simple gnosis knowledge, which may be concerned with the intellect without affecting the character... Hence the knowledge of sin here is not mere perception, but an acquaintance with sin which works toward repentance, faith, and holy character." (Vincent, M. Word Studies in the New Testament)

Sin (266) (**hamartia**) originally from the idea of missing the mark as when hunting with a bow and arrow and then missing or falling short of any goal, standard, or purpose. Thus when we commit sins we are missing the true ultimate purpose God has for each individual. In this verse (see next note) **sin** signifies the moral principle or force which is an integral part of every man's nature and which is evil in character and causes man to commit specific unrighteous acts or sins.

The **Preacher's Commentary** makes an excellent point emphasizing that...

There is a major difference between **"sin"** and **"sins,"** so we must be careful not to confuse "doing things that are not right" with the fact that we are dominated by a fundamentally evil dynamic. The difference is not unlike that which exists between the symptoms of a disease and the disease itself. When this is understood it becomes obvious that the human predicament is not so much that we have done things wrongly but that we are "in the Christless state under the command, under the authority, under the control of sin and helpless to escape from it." Accordingly, any solution to the human problem that fails to deal with the root cause of "sin" is no more a solution than cold compresses on a fevered brow are a cure for the infection causing the fever. ([Briscoe, D. S., & Ogilvie, L. J. The Preacher's Commentary Series, NT. 2003; Thomas Nelson](#)) (Bolding added)

Middletown Bible comments that...

There are certain things that the law **CANNOT DO** and there are certain things that the law **CAN DO**. According to this verse, what is the law unable to do? It is unable to justify sinful man. But this same verse

teaches that the law can give men the knowledge of sin. It can show man his utter sinfulness. The purpose of the law may be illustrated by a **MIRROR**. As I carry on the activities of the day, I may somehow get dirt on my face and not even realize it. A mirror serves a wonderful purpose of showing me that I have a dirty face. It shows me that I have a problem. But the mirror cannot wash away the dirt! Likewise, God's holy law can show me that I am a guilty sinner (incapable of keeping God's holy commandments), but it can never save me. It can only condemn me and show me that I need a Saviour. Just as the mirror should drive you to the soap and water, so the **LAW** should drive you to the **LAMB** of God who is able to save you and take away your sins! ([Romans 3](#))

Illustration of the purpose of the Law: Phillips paraphrase says that it is "the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are".

How is the Law like a straight-edge? We could never know what a crooked line is unless we had a straight line to compare with. The law is like that straight-edge. When men test themselves by the "straight-edge" of the Law, they see how crooked they are. The Law then is good when it is used to produce conviction of sin, but it is worthless as a savior from sin.

In this way the Law is like a mirror we use to see the dirt on our face. The mirror however is not designed to wash or remove the dirt but only to reveal the dirt.

Similarly, a thermometer may show us that we have a fever and therefore are sick, but swallowing the thermometer will not cure our illness.

The same logic applies to the Law. It is like a plumbline. Plumbines are not meant to straighten the building but to tell one how crooked it is and where the change needs to be made. The Law as our "plumbline" is like a "tutor" and is profitable for teaching for reproof for correction for training in righteousness.

The law has served its purpose when it has made men feel to the full how sinful they are; it brings them down to this point, but it is not for it to lift them up.

As far as the Jew, then, is concerned, "His death warrant is, as it were, written into his own birth certificate." (the Law) That which was thought by many to be a means of salvation is really the means of condemnation, and not of the Jew alone, but also of the Gentile.

In sum, righteousness (at least that which is acceptable to God) then, cannot come from **works of the Law** or by any manner of self-effort.

Our Lord said, speaking of the self-righteousness,

They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Lk 5:31,32-note).

By this bold declaration Jesus sought to point His listeners to an examination of their hearts and, by that examination, to a sense of their need. In like manner, from Romans 1:18 through Romans 3:20 Paul has clearly demonstrated every man's **need** for the righteousness which is found only in Christ Jesus. In the next section of this magnum opus, Romans 3:21-5:21, Paul explains the **way** of obtaining this perfect righteousness.

As the hymn writer has so beautifully phrased it...

THERE IS A FOUNTAIN FILLED WITH BLOOD

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains

THE LAW

William Newell

(Commenting on Romans 3:20)

"In this verse we meet by far the most difficult Divine utterance for the human heart to yield to, that we have met in the entire Epistle. Even those "without law, --" Gentiles that have not the Law" (of Moses--Ro 2.14), we find throughout history so committed to their own ideas of what is "right," and what will propitiate the demons that they worship, that they will desperately fight for their convictions... And how much more difficult the task becomes in dealing with those who, as the Jews, know that they have had a

direct revelation from God, --"Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not, " and, "He that doeth these things shall live by them. When Paul told the Athenians that he acknowledged them to be "very religious" (their city indeed being filled with idols), but that they were ignorant of God, the Creator, who had raised up from the dead One who would be Judge in righteousness: "Some mocked: others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again."

Now, we say, if men are brought off only with great difficulty from the follies of idolatry, how much greater the task to persuade men to abandon their trust in a holy Law they know to have been given by the true God, from heaven, and on the fulfillment of which all their hopes for eternity have been dependent! (Someone says, "It is not the good works men have done so much as the good works they persuade themselves they some time will do, in which they hope." For almost all know themselves to have failed; yet they promise themselves that they will be "better"; and the thought of being declared righteous by a work altogether outside of themselves, never once occurs to them!) In Just the same way Christendom has become fixed in its defense of its "religious" convictions. Scripture names, doctrines and ordinances--falsely explained--have seized hold upon the convictions of men, so that it is more difficult to dislodge them from their position than the heathen themselves.

We know from Scripture, for example, that "days, seasons, months and years, " do not belong to the Christian position in the least degree, but are Jewish or pagan in origin. Christmas, Lent, Easter, the whole "church calendar, " forms, ritualism... --where are these found in the Epistles of the New Testament ? They are not found! Yet try once to dislodge them from those in whose hearts they have been planted! For their heart-hopes are bound up with these false traditions. None but those taught of God, and they with extreme difficulty and constant watchfulness, escape legal hope. For the question ever before the conscience is, If keeping God's Law avails me nothing for righteousness in His sight, why did He give it?

WHY DID HE GIVE IT? And this difficulty becomes all the greater, the more the excellency of the Law is discovered! For our judgment sees these things of the Law to be "holy, and righteous, and good." And we know (if we are honest) that "God spake all these words"--of the Law. Therefore, the heart's only relief is to hear God's own Word concerning seven questions; to all of which the coming chapters of Romans will give answer:

- (1) To what nation did He give the Law;
- (2) Why He gave the Law;
- (3) What the Law's ministry was;
- (4) How it was set aside, or "annulled, " for another principle entirely;
- (5) What is meant by the words "under grace";
- (6) How the walk "in the Spirit" takes the place of walking by external enactments; and,
- (7) How that only in those not under law is "the righteous state" (dikaioma) of the Law fulfilled!

Now it is apparent that to bring men off from their false hopes in their law-obedience, three things must become evident to them:

- (a) That law, having been broken, can only condemn.
- (b) That even were men enabled now to begin keeping perfectly any law of God, that could not make up for past disobedience, or remove present guilt.
- (c) That keeping law is NOT God's way of salvation, or of blessing.

In connection with verse 20, we will emphasize only the third of these points, for that is what is insisted upon in this verse. We quote in the footnote below verse 20, and then a number of plain statements of Scripture to the same effect, that we may compare Scripture with Scripture: (Ed note: Here are the verses Newell quotes:

"By works of law shall no flesh be Justified in his sight; for through law cometh the recognition of sin (Ro 3:20).

A man is justified by faith, apart from works of law (Ro 3:28).

To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness (Ro 4.5).

Not through the Law was the promise made to Abraham ... but through the righteousness of faith (Ro 4.13).

For if they that are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect (Ro 4.14).

Through the obedience of the One shall the many be constituted righteous. And law came in alongside, that the trespass might abound (Ro 5:19,20).

Ye are not under law, but under grace (Ro 6:14).

Ye were made dead to the Law through the body of Christ (Ro 7:4).

We have been discharged from the Law (Ro 7:6).

Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth (Ro 10:4).

Until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remaineth, it not being revealed to them that it is done away in Christ (2Cor 3:14).

A man is not justified by works of law but through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16)

If ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under law (Gal 5:18). Law is not made for a righteous man (1Ti 1:9).

For there is a disannulling of a foregoing commandment [by Him who gave it] because of its weakness and unprofitableness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and a bringing in thereupon of a better hope, [Christ's work] through which we draw nigh unto God (Heb 7:18,19).

The knowledge (or recognition) of sin comes through law, --by (1) its revealing what God approved in man, and what God disapproved and forbade; (2) causing man to undertake obedience; and (3) condemning him for failure to obey.

To all seven of the questions above, the coming chapters of Romans, compared with other Scriptures, will, as we have said, fully give the answers. But it will be wise, perhaps, to look a moment more, in this place, at questions 2, 3 and 4:

As to **Question Two**, Why God gave the Law, we call attention now, as elsewhere, to the fact that in His dealing with Abraham, and, in fact, in all His ways with the patriarchs, there was not the Law, but simply and only the promise. We plainly see in Romans 5:14 that they were not under law. They walked by simple faith, which is, of course, the only principle according to which God has saving relations with man since he became a sinner. But (and this is important) God must show man his sinner hood and this could not be done but by His revealing His holiness and righteousness, and asking man to conform his life and ways to that holy and righteous rule. God knew he would not and could not do this; but man did not know it, and must discover it through failure. Therefore and thereunto did God give the Law. "By the Law is the knowledge of sin."

We have now partly answered **Question Three**, as to what was the appointed ministry of the Law. But the matter needs to be further emphasized. God names the Law a "ministration of condemnation and death" and not of righteousness. As Paul says in Chapter Seven, "Sin, that it might be shown to be sin, wrought death to me through that which was good" (the Law).

As to **Question Four**, the Law was set aside or "disannulled." We have God's oft-repeated and most emphatic assertion, that this has been done: "There is a disannulling of a foregoing commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and a bringing in thereupon of a better hope, [Christ's death, burial and resurrection], through which we draw nigh unto God" (Heb 7:18,19). We repeat this over and over, because that is the way God does--He asserts and re-asserts this great fact: knowing man's self-righteousness will hardly suffer the Law to be taken away.

Now it was not that God changed His plan, though to the thoughtless mind He might seem to have done so:

(1) by beginning with man on the faith principle--from Abel onward; then

(2) conditioning Israel's relationship and blessing upon their legal obedience; and then

(3) "changing back" again, since the cross, to the way of simple faith apart from law. No, there has been no "change" in God. God's way with man has always been that of faith.

Neither was the Law a thing additional to faith to secure God's favor; nor was God's "disannulling the foregoing commandment" an evidence that He had been seeking and expecting righteousness in man by the Law; and that now since the Law had failed He resorted to grace, apart from works of the Law. Not at all!

The Law came in simply that the trespass might abound, --that is, that by breaking it man might discover his guilt and sinfulness; and his helplessness to relieve himself. Moses had prophesied in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that Israel would utterly fail, and that they would be provoked to jealousy by God's bringing in the Gentiles, "a foolish nation"; and that the remnant of Israel finally, its whole legal hope cut off, would be restored by God in sovereign mercy (Romans 11:31,32). We know we are saying these things over and over. An old German educator said:

"The first principle of teaching is repetition; and the second principle of teaching is repetition; and the third principle is repetition."

So we come to the next great section of the Epistle, Chapter Three, verses 21 to 31. This will describe God's righteousness

through faith in Jesus Christ." ([Newell, W: Romans: Verse by Verse](#))