

PSA Examined

Article Series:

Article #18: What is Justification?
What does "Clothed in the Righteousness of Christ" mean?



PSA Series “ What is Justification? What Does “Clothed in the Righteousness of Christ” Mean?

Description

PSA Examined

Article Series:

Article #18: What is Justification?
What does "Clothed in the Righteousness of Christ" mean?



Welcome to the 18th article in this series on PSA (*Penal*

Substitutionary Atonement), and you can start with [the intro article](#) to catch up if you have some extra time. (Okay, a lot of extra time; deep study and nuance take time.)

Like [the previous article defining faith](#), this article can be mostly read apart from the rest of the series if you’re only interested in what “Justification” means, and/or want to know what “clothed in the righteousness of Christ” means. However, it will be crucial to understanding PSA, especially its 4th pillar, which we’ll examine at the end of the article.

Without further ado, we’ll begin.

Clothed in? what?

So, the title of this article includes: “What Does “Clothed in the Righteousness of Christ” Mean?” That’s actually a very poor question because that particular phrase doesn’t appear in the Bible anywhere. **No joke. It doesn’t exist in scripture.** That specific phrase doesn’t appear, nor even that basic idea, despite it being such a popular phrase.

However, we'll look at the verses that often get subconsciously cobbled together to make that phrase.

Galatians 3:23-29

23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. **24** Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us to* Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. **25** But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. **26** For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. **27** For **all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** **28** There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **29** And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

Notably absent is any mention of righteousness, but other passages do address that.

Philippians 3:8-11

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom **I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,** **9** and may be found **in Him,** not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is **through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,** **10** that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; **11** in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

We have the righteousness "through faith in Christ" element, but the "clothed in" element is missing. As to "being clothed in Christ", there's the Galatians verse above, plus Romans:

Romans 13:12-14

12 The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and **put on the armor of light.** **13** Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. **14** But **put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.**

I usually quote the Greek because there's some extra nuance, but not here. The word translated "put on" simply means to "put on" clothes. (It's [ἐνδύω](#) if you want to look it up.) The same word is also used in a similar context elsewhere:

Colossians 3:12-15

12 So, **as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience;** **13** bearing with one another, and

11 "For when the ear heard, it called me blessed,
And when the eye saw, it gave witness of me,

12 Because I delivered the poor who cried for help,
And the orphan who had no helper.

13 "The blessing of the one ready to perish came upon me,
And I made the widow's heart sing for joy.

14 "I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;
My justice was like a robe and a turban.

15 "I was eyes to the blind
And feet to the lame.

16 "I was a father to the needy,
And I investigated the case which I did not know.

17 "I broke the jaws of the wicked
And snatched the prey from his teeth.

Now, God does correct Job's attitude at the end of the book, so perhaps this isn't good evidence. However, it does align with Revelation. Speaking of Job, or more specifically, the Old Testament, there's a connection there that we shouldn't miss.

The Old Testament connection

If you read something in the New Testament and think: "What in the world is he talking about?", it's probably a reference to the Old Testament. Obviously not always, but very often.

This is no different.

A lot of the New Testament is built on the foundation of the Old Testament, and if you don't recognize the Old Testament references, you'll likely misunderstand the New Testament's teaching on it.

It's the same with the "clothing" concept.

I honestly didn't realize that the various "clothed" statements in the New Testament were based on the Old Testament until I started doing the research for this article. Now, I wish I had been taught that decades ago. Oh well.

Anyway, here's the passage.

Zechariah 3:1-7

1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before **the angel of the LORD**, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. 2 The LORD said to Satan, “The LORD rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?” 3 **Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel.** 4 He spoke and said to those who were standing before him, saying, “Remove the filthy garments from him.” Again he said to him, “See, **I have taken your iniquity away from you** and will **clothe you** with festal robes.” 5 Then I said, “Let them put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments, while **the angel of the LORD** was standing by.

6 And **the angel of the LORD** admonished Joshua, saying, 7 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, “If you will walk in My ways and if you will perform My service, then you will also govern My house and also have charge of My courts, and I will grant you free access among these who are standing *here*.”

We’ve covered the idea of “taking away sin/iniquity” many times in this series, so I’ll only briefly recap. Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the world” according to John 1:29. The *sin* purification offering did the same thing symbolically in the Old Testament, as we covered in [the 7th article](#). The phrase “taken your iniquity away” refers to Jesus’s life/blood cleansing/purging away the contamination of sin and its resultant corruption via the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, as Titus 3:5 says and as we covered in [the 9th article](#). That happens initially and partially at salvation, and then finally and completely on the New Earth, which results in us receiving glorified and incorruptible bodies, as we covered in that same article.

Now, we’ll detour just a moment to talk about an important element of this passage. It’s a rabbit trail from the “clothing” issue, but noteworthy for our discussion of PSA.

The heavenly courtroom

There’s something important about this passage in Zechariah that we shouldn’t miss. The “angel of the LORD” is almost certainly the pre-incarnate Jesus, as we covered in [the 8th article](#). That means that the pre-incarnate Jesus is functioning as the defense attorney, while Satan is the prosecutor, and Joshua is the defendant.

Notably, this is a heavenly courtroom scene.

But notice who is rebuked: It’s Satan.

It’s not the accused (*Joshua*) for his sins.

It’s Satan.

From a PSA worldview, the accuser is God’s commitment to justice, and/or His wrath against sin. However, scripturally, it’s seemingly always Satan that’s accusing. (*And God judging.*) That’s even a title of Satan.

Revelation 12:9-11

9 And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. **10** Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. **11** "And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

You see the same thing in the book of Job, where God praises Job, Satan accuses Job in response, and then God defends Job. (*Job 1:6-12, and also Job 2:1-6*) It always seems that Satan is the accuser, and God is the defender. At least, this is the case in the heavenly courtroom. Obviously God accuses the wicked of things all throughout the Bible, but it's virtually always to call them to repentance, or else to inform them of the judicial sentence for their (*unrepentant*) sin.

But Satan is different.

Satan accuses to get us (*believers*) in trouble. And at least according to Zechariah 3, God rebukes him for that.

Now, PSA could easily say that God also desires us to be saved, and so Satan is just trying to get God to administer strict justice on the basis of His holy character. That's a reasonable response, but I personally find that it doesn't fit the tone of the relevant passages. That's a personal thing though, not objective, so we'll move on.

Back to the "clothing" issue.

Clothing redux

Again, the heavenly courtroom scene in Zechariah 3 gives us the lens to understand what the "clothing" language is about in the New Testament. Missing this Old Testament context is a great way to misunderstand what the New Testament is saying.

Thus, the "clothing" language in the New Testament is about the "taking away" of sin.

(Or sometimes the righteous acts of the saints, as Revelation says.)

Probably the most famous example of this is one of Jesus's parables. In the parable, a king prepared a wedding feast for his son, but the invited guests didn't come. Instead, some of them killed the king's messengers, which caused the king to repay them in kind. We'll pick the story

up there:

Matthew 22:8-14

8 “Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 9 “Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find *there*, invite to the wedding feast.” 10 “Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests.

11 “But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, **he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, 12 and he said to him, “Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?”** And the man was speechless. 13 “Then the king said to the servants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” 14 “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Now, the most common interpretation of this passage (*that I’ve heard*) is that the man isn’t clothed in the righteousness of Christ i.e. he’s not a believer/Christian/saved and that’s why he’s tossed out. Now, that’s not necessarily wrong if you only take the big picture, but it’s very wrong on the details. The issue is that he hasn’t had his sin taken away by Jesus, not that Jesus’s righteousness isn’t somehow wrapped around him.

Modern Christians tend to have a “snow-covered dunghill” view of sin and righteousness.

They tend to see believers as the dung (*our sin*) covered with snow (*Christ’s righteousness*). It’s often expressed like this: “When God looks at me, He sees Christ’s righteousness instead of sinful, wretched me.” However, that’s not the biblical picture **at all**. The biblical picture is more like the Mona Lisa has had dung thrown onto it, and Jesus comes and cleans (*takes away*) the dung to restore the painting.

(I particularly like the Mona Lisa analogy because many consider it the best painting of all time. We are made in God’s image, which is clearly the best image of all time. We proverbially throw mud on it when we sin, and Jesus cleans us up when He saves us. I think it’s a good word picture.)

The Bible paints a picture of cleansing from sin by taking that sin away, not merely concealing it under Christ’s righteousness.

That explains verses like this one:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, **He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

The “snow-covered dunghill” view doesn’t make much sense of this. If it’s already been covered, (*notably covered, not cleansed*), I suppose the idea is that it’s like dung covered by snow, and then more dung gets added so its topped with more snow to cover it? Something

like that? But a cleansing model is more like we throw more dung (*sin again*) on the Mona Lisa (*us*), and Jesus washes it off again. Thus, Jesus “takes away” the dung by cleansing it.

Again, that’s the lesson of Zechariah 3’s statement about taking iniquity away.

That’s important.

There are other hints of this in other passages as well.

Isaiah 61:8-11

8 For I, the LORD, love justice,
I hate robbery in the burnt offering;
And I will faithfully give them their recompense
And make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 Then their offspring will be known among the nations,
And their descendants in the midst of the peoples.
All who see them will recognize them
Because they are the offspring *whom* the LORD has blessed.

10 I will rejoice greatly in the LORD,
My soul will exult in my God;
For **He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness,**
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
And as a garden causes the things sown in it to spring up,
So the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
To spring up before all the nations.

We already covered how “taking away sin” results in salvation in [the 9th article](#). Now, before we move to the next major section of the article, we need to take a small rabbit trail back to Revelation first.

A brief rabbit trail

Basically, this is a return to the Revelation verse that I said we’d come back to later because it bears closer examination.

Revelation 19:7-9

7 “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” 8 **It was given to her to clothe herself in fine**

Revelation 19:2-6

2 And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who were victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. 3 And they *sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

â€œGreat and marvelous are Your works,
Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!

4â€œWho will not fear You, Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU,
For Your righteous acts (*dikaiã³ma*) have been revealed.â€•

5 After these things I looked, and the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened, 6 and the seven angels who had the seven plagues came out of the temple, clothed in linen, clean *and* bright, and their chests wrapped with golden sashes.

Now, the NKJV and the KJV translate it slightly differently:

Revelation 15:4 (NKJV)

Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For *You alone are* holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, For Your judgments (*dikaiã³ma*) have been manifested.â€•

Itâ€™s notable that the NKJV is just about the only translation that translates it this way. The reason very few do is almost certainly poetic parallelism. Youâ€™ll notice the lines in verse 3 that say: â€œGreat and marvelous are Your worksâ€• and also: â€œRighteous and true are Your waysâ€•. Thus, â€œrighteous actsâ€• fits in perfectly, while â€œjudgementsâ€• seems to fit poorly. Itâ€™s possible, but not a good fit.

Now, weâ€™ll look at the other place, which is much more interesting:

Romans 5:15-19

15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. 16 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**. (*dikaiã³ma*) 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** (*dikaiōma*) 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.

Now, isn't that interesting. The same word used just two verses apart and given radically different translations. Now, I don't want to make too much of that because it happens, and honestly, I did the same thing when translating Romans. (*Which you can see [here](#) if you care.*)

However, contextually, "righteous act" doesn't make a lot of sense. Here's what that would look like, and please compare it with the context above to see whether it fits:

Romans 5:16 (*modified*)

16 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 a righteous act.** (*dikaiōma*)

Now, of course, it did lead to a righteous act (*Jesus on the cross*), **but that's not a contrast with "condemnation" in the first clause of this verse.** (*By the way, "condemnation" is more literally "a guilty verdict", as we saw in [the 8th article](#).*) Normally, when I see a definition in a lexicon that has a completely different sense than is usual for a word, especially when it's in a theologically significant passage, I assume something fishy is going on. We've actually seen this several times already in this PSA series.

However, it seems like here that one-off meaning is indeed the intent.

I'm not sure how else to understand this verse. Understanding it as a "righteous ordinance" is also within the word's range of meaning, but that makes even *less* sense than "a righteous act". I looked at a bunch of lexicons, including BDAG (*the most respected, gold standard lexicon*), and **the lexicons all say that the use of "dikaiōma" here is equivalent to the Greek word normally translated "justification".** (*Which we'll look at soon.*)

Part of the reason for this rabbit hole is transparency.

We've admittedly made a pretty big deal out of one-off meanings in theologically significant passages being a problem. This verse shows that sometimes, that does happen. So, if a PSA fellow wanted to claim that this is precedent for PSA's other one-off meanings in other passages, that's legitimate. As a counterpoint, the context in this case makes it clear the unusual meaning is intended, which hasn't been true for the examples that support PSA. In fact, the PSA examples often ran directly counter to the context.

With that covered, we'll move on to discussing "justification" and the underlying Greek words after a super quick recap of this section.

Recap on "clothed in the righteousness of Christ"

The phrase "clothed in the righteousness of Christ" doesn't occur in scripture. We are said to be "clothed in Christ", and our righteousness is "in Christ". However, the clothing metaphor refers to the Old Testament, in Zechariah, where it refers to sin being "taken away". Additionally, or perhaps alternately, the "clothes" that Christians wear are explicitly stated to be the "righteous acts" of the saints in some contexts.

Now, onto justification.

Justification

I spent an absurd amount of time looking through lexicons for the various Greek words related to the words (*plural*) that are translated "justification", "justify", etc. At the end of that, I found myself thanking God for Bill Mounce, because his lexicon was the one that made it all make sense. We'll look at that in a moment, but context first.

Before we can look at "justification" which many say means "to make righteous" we need to know what "righteous" means first. If we don't, we'll run the risk of misunderstanding what "justification" means because we don't understand what "righteous" means. Thus, we'll look at "righteous" first.

What "righteous" means

First, you need to know that "just" and "righteous" are the same word in Greek.

Seriously.

A "just" man and a "righteous" man would be described with the same Greek word, which is $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\varsigma$ ([dikaios](#)). You can see that if you compare translations, and here's one obvious example:

1 John 1:9

NKJV: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and **just** (*dikaios*) to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

NASB 95: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and **righteous** (*dikaios*) to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Now, this isn't much of a problem when we talk about just/righteous because we have words for that. However, we don't have an English equivalent of "justification" that includes "righteous", which would be something like "righteousification"; that's not a word though. Not having a word like that is a slight problem, but perhaps not an insurmountable one.

Now, we'll look at Mounce's lexicon. For those who don't know who Bill Mounce is, he wrote the Greek grammar that many seminaries use to teach Greek to pastors, theologians, and scholars. That lexicon is available for free online, so of course I'll have a source link so you can check it out yourself if you want to. Anyway, here's the quote.

This quote is for "δικαίος", which means just/righteous, not "justification". (We'll get to "justification" soon.)

right, righteous, upright; **in the NT this refers to God's proper standards and actions, expressed in the covenants; as a noun it refers to a person in accord with God's standards, in proper relationship with God**

[Source.](#)

That red, bold, underlined part is important: "a person in accord with God's standards, in proper relationship with God". Now, there's more to it. Again, I went looking at a lot of lexicons, and two others had a solid sliver of what I think the total meaning is. To get more of the meaning, we'll look at those two lexicons as well: Thayer's and BDAG.

Here's Thayer's:

δικαίος, ἰσχυρὸς, ἰσχυρὸς, ἰσχυρὸς (from δική. right) (fr. Homer down), properly, **the Hebrew x'ö-x'ö'ö'x'x', "observant of a law; righteous, observing divine and human laws; one who is such as he ought to be";** (German rechtbeschaffen; in the earlier language, whence appropriated by Luther, gerecht in a broad sense; in Greek writings used even of physical things, as δικαίος, Xenophon, mem. 4, 4, 5; ἰσχυρὸς, most fertile, Xenophon, Cyril 8, 3, 38; (δικαίος... ἰσχυρὸς, ibid. 2, 2, 26));

[Source.](#)

Okay, so "observant of divine and human laws; one who is such as he ought to be" is how Thayer's puts it, which does make some sense with Mounce, but more on that in a moment.

Next we'll look at BDAG, which is the gold-standard, universally agreed-upon best Koine Greek lexicon in the world. Sadly, it isn't available for free online, so I had to copy this from my printed copy. This will only be a partial quote because the entries for just the three words we'll look at in this article take up ~2.5 pages in the lexicon. (Another reason I won't do the whole thing; transcribing 2.5 pages would take forever.)

ἰστῆρῶν ἰσθῆρῶν, ἰσθῆρῶν, ἰσθῆρῶν (Hom.+; inscr., pap., LXX, En., Ep. Arist., Philo, Joseph., Test. 12 Patr .; loanw. in rabb.).

1. of men, *upright, just, righteous*, **like x:Ö-x“Ö´x™x§=conforming to the laws of God and man; applied to model citizens in the Graeco-Roman world.**

Now, weâ€™ll put all three of these things together so you can see the essence of the word distilled down to its core essentials:

- **Mounce:** a person in accord with Godâ€™s standards, in proper relationship with God
- **Thayerâ€™s:** observing divine and human laws; one who is such as he ought to be
- **BDAG:** conforming to the laws of God and man; applied to model citizens in the Graeco-Roman world

From those three lexicons, we can get the essence of the word. Please note that this is my own personal distillation of the wordâ€™s core meaning from (*primarily*) those three sources.

â€œJust/righteousâ€ means to be in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law.

This is how a man ought to be.

A proper relationship with God means following Him to the best of your ability, which means giving Him your loyalty and commitment, as we saw in [the previous article](#). This is the greatest commandment that Jesus Himself taught: â€œ*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*â€œ.

A proper relationship with man means, effectively, the second greatest commandment: â€œ*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*â€œ. Itâ€™s also formulated as the â€œGolden Ruleâ€ in Matthew 7:12: â€œ*whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them*â€œ. Basically, do right by your fellow man.

A proper relationship with the law means that youâ€™re a law-abiding citizen who doesnâ€™t intentionally break the law. If you do break it accidentally, you try your best to make it right.

Thatâ€™s what being just/righteous means.

However, that raises an obvious question, which weâ€™ll look at next.

Does being righteous require being sinless?

By the above definition, which admittedly was assembled from multiple lexicons, no it doesnâ€™t require sinlessness. **While being perfectly sinless would, of course, mean that youâ€™re righteous,**

you donâ€™t necessarily *have* to be sinless to be righteous by the above definition. (Though, of course you donâ€™t need to accept that definition.)

Itâ€™s worth noting that I donâ€™t remember a single lexicon saying that â€œrighteousâ€ means perfectly sinless, or even â€œsinlessâ€.

Not one.

Of course, I couldâ€™ve missed it because Iâ€™m only human, but I did look at a lot of lexicons, and several of them more than once.

If you say that â€œrighteousâ€ means sinless, you are without lexical support.

Additionally, and more importantly, if you say: â€œYou must be sinless in order to be righteousâ€, that creates problems with certain verses, and here are just a few of them:

Luke 2:25 And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was **righteous (dikaios)** and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Luke 23:50 And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and **righteous (dikaios)** man

Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he was attested to be **righteous (dikaios)**, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

Genesis 6:9 Then the LORD said to Noah, â€œCome into the ark, you and all your household, because I have seen *that you are righteous* before Me in this generation.

There are other examples, but those are clear and concise. Now, of course the obvious and instant response from many Christians, especially PSA-believing Christians, will be to reply with Romans 3:

Romans 3:9-12

9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

10 as it is written,
â€œTHERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, (dikaios) NOT EVEN ONE;

11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.â€

The usual argument would be that "there is none righteous, not even one" means that "righteous" refers to sinlessness, because otherwise Romans 3 doesn't make sense. That's a reasonable conclusion to make, however, it isn't the only one. There is another way to understand this.

If you'll remember in [the 9th article](#) (*the mid-series recap*), we also covered what the Gospel is. We covered that because of man's corrupted flesh, the presence of God is fatal to mankind. Not because God would kill us, but because God's glory is simply too much for our corrupted mortal bodies to bear. We also covered that that's part of why Jesus died, so our bodies could be cleansed of sin's corruption so we could live forever in the presence of God in glorified bodies on the New Earth.

Now, we were created to live in God's presence (*originally in the Garden of Eden*), but we can't currently do that. Thus, we aren't "righteous" in the sense that we aren't in proper relationship with God because we can't be in His presence.

That's a second legitimate way to understand this passage, and there are others. (*Which we won't get into here.*)

The point is that "righteous" doesn't need to mean "sinless", because men who sinned were called righteous by God Himself.

There's no way to get around this.

None.

God called men who sinned "righteous". Therefore, "righteous" **cannot** require sinlessness in the sense of "never sinned".

Period.

(*Though, of course a sinless person would be righteous.*)

The way to make sense of God Himself calling sinful men "righteous" is to accept that "righteous" doesn't mean sinless. That means moving away from the purely forensic and legal understanding that PSA insists on, and instead moving to an understanding that's more grounded in the Greek words actually used, and their actual lexical definitions.

Again, "righteous" means being in proper relationship with God, man, and the law,

Now, before we move on to "righteousness", we need to answer a question that arises from this definition.

How is God "righteous"?

God certainly is righteous, as it's written:

1 John 3:7

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as **He is righteous (dikaios)**

If "righteous" means "to be in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law", how does that apply to God Himself? Well, the answer isn't complicated unless you subscribe to PSA.

Remember that God is Triune, so of course God is always in a proper relationship with Himself. There was never a time that God didn't have a proper relationship to Himself, (*except under PSA; more on that in a moment*) so that part is covered.

God has always had a proper relationship to man as well. It wasn't God that messed up the relationship between God and man, but rather, man did that in the Garden when he sinned. God was actually the one who cleaned up our mess, even dying on a cross and rising again to fully restore the broken relationship, so we can't lay the blame at His feet.

God always had a proper relationship with "the law" as well. In fact, He Himself is the standard for morality, so *by definition* He always has a proper relationship with the law/morality. It's not even possible for Him to be out of proper relationship with it.

Thus, this definition seems to hold up perfectly when applied to God.

That's good, because otherwise it would be problematic.

However, consider that according to PSA, Jesus was cut off from the Father while He was on the cross. That means Jesus wasn't in proper relationship with God while He was on the cross.

Wouldn't that make Jesus not righteous (*unrighteous?*) while He was on the cross if PSA is correct?

That's a problem.

A big problem.

Now, perhaps you could say that Jesus was never *not* in a proper relationship with Himself, and since He is God, and thus say He remained righteous because he remained in proper relationship with Himself. However, if He no longer was in proper relationship with the Father, that's still not being in a proper relationship with God, even if He remained in proper relationship with Himself.

I don't see a way around this problem either, making it another blow against PSA. Perhaps not a fatal blow, but another blow.

Next, we'll look at "righteousness".

What is "righteousness"?

Like *δικαιοσύνη*, the Greek word for *righteousness* refers to the state of being in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law.

This is how a man ought to be, the condition acceptable to God.

There isn't a whole lot more to say on this word because we laid the groundwork when we looked at what *δικαιοσύνη* means. Thus, we'll move on to our last stop before the main event, and that stop is the verb form: *δικαιοῦμαι/justified*.

What does *δικαιοῦμαι* mean?

I'm sure you've heard the old expression that *δικαιοῦμαι* means *just-as-if-I've never sinned* to explain what the word means. As catchy as that is, it's slightly lacking in scholarly rigor, so we'll jump straight to the lexicons. The Greek word in question is *δικαιοῦμαι* (*dikaioō*), and it means:

Mounce:

to justify, vindicate, declare righteous, **to put someone in a proper relationship with another**, usually referring to God's relationship to humankind, implying a proper legal or moral relationship

[Source.](#)

This accords perfectly with what we've already seen. Thayer's is next, and it's quite a bit longer, but I thought the extra details might help.

Thayer's:

δικαιοῦμαι, *δικαιοῦμαι*-άζ; future *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; 1 aorist *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; passive (present *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; perfect *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; 1 aorist *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; future *δικαιοῦμαι*-ῶ; the Sept. for *δικαιοῦμαι* and *δικαιοῦμαι*;

1. properly, (according to the analogy of other verbs ending in , as *δικαιοῦμαι*, *δικαιοῦμαι*) **to make *δικαιοῦμαι*; to render righteous or such as he ought to be;** (*Vulg. justifico*); but this meaning is extremely rare, if not altogether doubtful; *δικαιοῦμαι* stands for *δικαιοῦμαι* in Psalm 72:13 () (unless I have shown my heart to be upright be preferred as the rendering of the Greek there).

2. ἴσχυροῦς, to show, exhibit, evince, one to be righteous, such as he is and wishes himself to be considered

3. ἴσχυροῦς, to declare, pronounce, one to be just, righteous, or such as he ought to be, (cf. ἀξιωματικός, to declare to be like, liken, i. e. compare; ἀξιωματικός, Wis. 6:11; ἀξιωματικός, which never means to make worthy, but to judge worthy, to declare worthy, to treat as worthy; see also ἴσχυροῦς, 2 b.);

a. with the negative idea predominant, to declare guiltless one accused or who may be accused, acquitted of a charge or reproach,

b. with the positive idea predominant, to judge, declare, pronounce, righteous and therefore acceptable,

1. equivalent to ἰσχυροῦς ἵκετο, to deem right or fair: ἴσχυροῦς, often followed by the infinitive; to choose what is right and fair, hence, universally, to choose, desire, decide: Herodotus, Sophocles, Thucydides, others.

2. with the accusative of person, ἴσχυροῦς ἵκετο, ἵκετο ἵκετο, ἵκετο ἵκετο, in a bad sense, viz. to condemn, punish, one: Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, others; hence, ἵκετο ἵκετο, to have justice done oneself, to suffer justice, be treated rightly, opposed to ἀξιωματικός, Aristotle, eth. Nic. 5, 9, 11, p. 1136{a}, 18ff (In like manner the German rechtfertigen in its early forensic use bore a bad sense, viz. to try judicially (so for ἀξιωματικός, Acts 12:19 Luther), then condemn; execute judgment, especially put to death.)

Source.

There's an important part of the summary that we shouldn't miss, so here it is again. Keep in mind that the third word, ἵκετο, is the one translated righteous.

to make ἵκετο; to render righteous or such as he ought to be; (Vulg. justifico); **but this meaning is extremely rare, if not altogether doubtful**

At first glance, this *seems* in direct opposition to Mounce. However, remember that when Thayer says: ἵκετο to make ἵκετο (righteous), and ἵκετο to render righteous or such as he ought to be. I think ἵκετο and I could be wrong but I think they have PSA lenses on and are thinking about forensic/legal categories, not relational ones. If that's the case, then that meaning would indeed be *extremely rare, if not altogether doubtful*.

However, that forensic/legal view isn't correct if we look at Mounce and BDAG because it's more about being in proper relationship with God, man, and the law. However, Thayer's does seem to cut against PSA's preferred definition, however weakly.

Now, here's BDAG: (Short definitions only, since transcribing all of them from my paper copy would take forever.)

to justify, vindicate, declare righteous, **to put someone in a proper relationship with another**, usually referring to God's relationship to humankind, implying a proper legal or moral relationship

[Source](#).

Take, for example, Romans 3:26, which has a fairly concentrated number of uses for "justify". (And don't forget that "propitiation" there actually refers to the lid of the Ark, or the "place of purification", as we saw in [the 6th](#) and [7th](#) articles.)

Romans 3:23-26

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24 being justified** as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; **25** whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; **26** for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be **just** and the **justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Now, let's look at that again with Mounce's understanding copy/pasted in, and notice that I split the final one for readability:

Romans 3:23-26 (modified)

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24 being put into proper relationship with God, man, and the law** as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; **25** whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; **26** for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be **in proper relationship with God, man, and the law**, and the [**One putting**] the one who has faith in Jesus [**into proper relationship with God, man, and the law**].

Yes, it's harder to read because it's so literal especially that last part "however, it **works perfectly**". It makes perfect sense, and God did it all so that He could be in proper relationship with us, and so we could be in proper relationship with him. He is so good!

In my opinion, this makes **way** more sense than the forensic/legal understanding of PSA.

In fact, it seems to work everywhere the word is used mostly. There are uses where the word demonstrates that someone is in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law, or where someone wants to be seen that way. Here's an example of each:

Luke 10:29 But wanting to **justify (dikaioÅ•)** himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Matthew 11:19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" But wisdom is **justified (dikaioÅ•)** by her children.

In the first, the man wanted to make himself sound righteous. In the second, wisdom personified was actually shown to be righteous by her deeds. The other way it's used is to mean "freed", as in Romans 6:

Romans 6:6-7

6 knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; **7** for he who has died is **freed (dikaioÅ•)** from sin.

Those are the uses that aren't in line with our working definition, but they are covered by the lexicons. **However, all the uses that are theologically significant for this series do indeed fall under our working definition.**

PSA's preferred definition, round #2

The other definition that PSA will prefer is 3.a. (*below is short for "writers"*)

3. Paul, who has influenced later wr., uses the word almost exclusively of God's judgment. Esp.

a. of men **be acquitted**, be pronounced and treated as righteous and thereby become

Now, PSA will say that this acquittal is based on Jesus dying vicariously in our place as our substitute on the cross, which results in having Jesus's righteousness credited to our account.

However, the crucial thing is what PSA means by this.

According to some versions of PSA, "justify" = A legal declaration without a real change.

As we covered above, PSA often has a "snow-covered dunghill" view of righteousness. According to PSA, Jesus merely covers our sin with His righteousness, so that when God looks at us,

He sees Jesus's righteousness instead of our sin. That's what PSA often means when it says that Jesus's righteousness is credited to our account. I've often heard it said by PSA believing Christians that: "God treated Jesus like He was wicked even though He wasn't, so that He could treat us as righteous even though we aren't." (Notably, that statement assumes the forensic/legal understanding of righteousness.)

The popular Christian answers website "Got Questions" phrases it this way in their article: "What is justification?"

Simply put, to justify is to declare righteous. Justification is an act of God whereby He pronounces a sinner to be righteous because of that sinner's faith in Christ. Properly understood, justification has to do with God's declaration about the sinner, not any change within the sinner. That is, justification, per se, **does not make anyone holy**; it simply declares him to be not guilty before God and therefore treated as holy.

[Source.](#)

That's quite an interesting statement, and it's restated even more clearly in their article: "Justification vs sanctification" what are the differences?"

Justification, a term used in the Bible forensically/legally, is defined as "an act of God by which those who are unrighteous in themselves are nevertheless declared righteous before God while still in the sinning state."

[Source.](#)

So basically, according to PSA, God says that we are righteous when we aren't.

(Some PSA adherents might not hold to this, but many do. I would say the majority from my subjective and informal observations.)

This really comes back to a flawed understanding of what "righteous" means. PSA assumes that it must mean "sinless", which causes all kinds of problems. For one, we've already seen that some men were called "righteous" even though they had sinned. **However, that's a secondary problem to the biggest problem: it violates the explicit testimony of scripture.**

(Have you noticed how often PSA seems to do that?)

Remember the "snow-covered dunghill" analogy. In agreement with Got Questions, the "snow-covered dunghill" analogy says that we're still wicked, but God declared us as righteous/just/holy anyway. That runs into problems on scriptural grounds.

Proverbs 24:23-25

23 These also are sayings of the wise.
To show partiality in judgment is not good.

24 He who says to the wicked, “You are righteous (tsaddiq),”
Peoples will curse him, nations will abhor him;

25 But to those who rebuke the *wicked* will be delight,
And a good blessing will come upon them.

That seems like a nearly explicit condemnation of PSA’s view of justification, especially as exemplified by the “snow-covered dunghill” analogy. PSA says that we’re still horribly wicked, just “clothed in the righteousness of Christ.” Got Questions was explicit that **PSA’s version of justification doesn’t actually make us righteous, it’s merely a legal declaration that we are righteous when we aren’t.**

If the biggest problem with that doesn’t immediately spring to mind, let me help:

Titus 1:2 in the hope of eternal life, which **God, who cannot lie**, promised long ages ago,

Hebrews 6:18 so that by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.

God cannot lie, and He explicitly condemns calling a wicked man righteous when he isn’t righteous.

We looked at the reverse side of this previously in [the 16th article](#), when we talked about God treating Jesus as guilty in PSA’s use of legal fictions and imputation. Well, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander; it seems to be wrong both ways.

Further, with a proper understanding of “righteous,” it’s easy to say that a man can be righteous because it doesn’t mean sinless. Thus, God could call us righteous because we’re in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law.

Holy or not?

That “Got Questions?” says this in part:

Properly understood, justification has to do with God’s declaration *about* the sinner, **not any change *within* the sinner. That is, justification, per se, does not make anyone holy**; it simply *declares* him to be not guilty before God and therefore **treated as holy**.

[Source](#).

There’s a word Paul often uses to address his letters, and that word is “ἅγιοι” ([hagios](#)). Here’s a typical example, though there are many others:

Colossians 1:1-2

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the **saints (hagios)** and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

Our English word "saint" comes from Latin, as the Online Etymology Dictionary explains:

saint (n.)

early 12c. as an adjective, seinte, "holy, divinely inspired, worthy of worship," used before proper names (Sainte Marian Magdalene, etc.), from Old French saint, seinte "holy, pious, devout," from Latin **sanctus** "holy, consecrated," past participle of sancire "consecrate" (see sacred). It displaced or altered Old English sanct, which is directly from Latin sanctus.

[Source.](#)

When the New Testament's original Greek was translated into Latin, they used "sanctus" (meaning "holy") to translate "hagios" (which means "holy," which we'll see in a moment) in places like Colossians 1:2. As you might've guessed from the etymology of "saint," the Greek word means "holy." (*Gloss in the quote indicates good translations of the word in various contexts.*)

Gloss:

holy (moral quality), consecrated ([ceremonially] acceptable to God); **holy person/people = saint(s), holy place = sanctuary**

Definition:

separate from common condition and use; dedicated., Lk. 2:23; hallowed; used of things, the sanctuary; and **of persons, saints, e.g., members of the first Christian communities; pure, righteous, ceremonially or morally; holy**

[Source.](#)

I know, you're "shocked" that it means holy. Thus, Colossians could read:

Colossians 1:1-2 (modified)

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the **holy ones** and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

God inspired the New Testament, so when God inspired the title of "holy" (*ones*), He was calling them holy, but PSA says that we aren't holy. That leaves us with this contrast:

justification at the end of verse 25, which we examined in [the 5th article](#).) I suppose that even a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while, and I did check to make sure it doesn't mistranslate this section too badly.

Romans 4:22 – 5:2 (ESV, again, sorry.)

22 That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness. **23** But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, **24** but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead **Jesus our Lord, 25** who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our **justification** (*dikaiōsis*).

1 Therefore, since we have been justified (*dikaioō*) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. **2** Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

For this next one, please remember, we're looking at *dikaiōsis*, not *dikaioōma*. I've highlighted both, since "justification" isn't the same word in this passage.

Romans 5:15-19

15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. **16** 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.** (*dikaioōma*) **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 (*dikaioōma*) there resulted **justification** (*dikaiōsis*) 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.

Now that you have the context, the relevant sections in those two passages are:

- who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our **justification** (*dikaiōsis*)
- through one act of righteousness (*dikaioōma*) there resulted **justification** (*dikaiōsis*) of life to all men.

Now, as previously covered, we can look at these two ways. The PSA way which says that "justification" refers to a legal declaration that we are innocent even though we aren't, and the non-PSA way that sees these as us being restored to a proper relationship with God.

Here's a funny thing though: "raised for our justification" makes no sense under the PSA model.

I literally just grabbed the first occurrence of the word, and notice that part of Noah's righteousness was that he walked with God! but I digress. We spent a lot of time looking at the verb form of this word "which is *tsadeq* (tsadeq) in [the article on Isaiah 53](#). Here's Isaiah 53:11

Isaiah 53:11

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see *it and* be satisfied;
By His knowledge the **Righteous (*tsaddiq, adjective form*)** One,
My Servant, will **justify (*tsadeq, verb form*)** the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.

Now, after all the research in the article, the conclusion was that this verse has the following meaning:

Isaiah 53:11 (*modified*)

11 As a result of the anguish of His soul,
He will see *it and* be satisfied;
By His knowledge the Righteous (*tsaddiq, adjective form*) One,
My Servant, **will cause** the many **to turn to righteousness (*tsadeq, verb form*)**
And He will carry away their iniquities.

Please see that article for the details on how we got there. I bring this up because while *tsadeq* (*the verb form*) can mean *to acquit* in a judicial sense, that's not the sense used when describing what Jesus (*the Righteous One, My Servant*) will do. Instead, Isaiah prophesied that Jesus *will cause the many to turn to righteousness*. He didn't prophesy that Jesus would *acquit the many*, he prophesied that Jesus would turn them to righteousness.

Now, this isn't strong evidence of the meaning of *righteous*, *righteousness*, or *justify*, but **it bears a lot of weight in the context of Jesus's work**

It isn't about an acquittal, it's about turning them to righteousness! which according to the definitions we've seen, means turning them toward a proper relationship with God, man, and the law. That makes sense. In fact, it makes perfect sense.

Righteous objects?

Now, please keep in mind that words have a range of meaning as you read this section. It's entirely possible that we're bumping up against a different meaning for the Hebrew word. However, I don't think we are.

The Bible records *righteous* objects.

Now, it's usually translated *just* objects, but again, *just* and *righteous* have effectively the same meaning. Here's just one example, and most of them are similar and refer to

weights and measures.

Leviticus 19:36

“You shall have **just (tsedeq)** balances, **just (tsedeq)** weights, a **just (tsedeq)** ephah, and a **just (tsedeq)** hin; I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.

A definition of “sinless” simply doesn’t make sense here. Not at all. Now, the “proper relationship” understanding doesn’t *quite* fit perfectly, but it fits reasonably well. A “righteous/just” weight would be one that’s in a proper relationship with God, man, and the law; i.e. it weighs what everyone agrees that it should weigh. Again, not perfect, but fits pretty well.

This cuts against the “sinless” understanding yet again. However, it doesn’t cut against it too strongly, so I don’t want to make too much of it. This is simply another piece of evidence for the pile.

Final checks

Now, the word is used too often to go through all the instances in the New Testament. However, I do have a resource that’ll make that easy: Mounce’s free online lexicon. You can look up “[righteous](#)”, “[righteousness](#)”, and “[justify](#)” at those links, and he lists all the occurrences at the bottom of the page. If you’re really serious about this, you can go through and look at all of them on one page. I actually recommend that if you have the time, but I completely understand if you don’t.

It works perfectly if you keep in mind that “justify” (*the verb*) can also mean to demonstrate righteousness, or affirm that someone is righteous. Also, don’t forget that it can also mean to make someone free. (*There’s an interesting observation there that, perhaps, “free” is part of how man is supposed to be, but I won’t chase that rabbit trail here.*)

While I was reading through all of them after finishing the rough draft of this article (*there’s a reason it takes me so long to write them*), the following two verses jumped out at me:

1 John 2:29

If you know that He is righteous, you know that **everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him.**

And a few verses later:

1 John 3:7

Little children, make sure no one deceives you; **the one who practices righteousness is righteous**, just as He is righteous;

Obviously God is righteous. However, understanding these verses as "sinless" doesn't make any sense. However, a proper understanding of righteousness makes these verses make perfect sense. There are others like this, but these stood out to me as I was doing my own final checks.

There's one more thing we need to examine before we look at PSA's 4th pillar.

Bribing God?

I'll admit right up front that this isn't the strongest case. However, once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. I won't spend much time developing it, and I don't think I'd defend it in the comments because it isn't that strong, but I couldn't not include it.

Context first:

Ephesians 5:2 and walk in love, just as **Christ** also loved you and gave Himself up for us, **an offering and a sacrifice to God** as a fragrant aroma.

Hebrews 9:14 how much more will the blood of **Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit **offered Himself without blemish to God**, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

So, Jesus was definitely a sacrifice to God. Other places tell us:

1 Corinthians 6:20 For **you have been bought with a price**: therefore glorify God in your body.

And elsewhere clarifies what the price was:

1 Peter 1:18-19

18 knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, **19 but with precious blood**, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, **the blood of Christ**.

From a non-PSA perspective, the "price" is like when a soldier "pays the ultimate price" when he sacrifices himself to accomplish the mission. The offering to God is Jesus dying so that God could use Jesus's life/blood to save us through the Holy Spirit's indwelling by cleansing our corrupted mortal bodies of sin's corruption.

Conversely, the PSA argument is that God punishing Jesus satisfied God's demand for justice. However, there's a very real sense where it sounds like Jesus purchased us from God at the cost of His blood. PSA makes it sound like Jesus's blood was a payment to God (*because Jesus offered Himself to God*) in order to get God to declare us righteous even though we aren't.

Thereâ€™s an English word for that.

A â€œbribeâ€.

A â€œbribeâ€ is when you pay someone to do something that he shouldnâ€™t do, like paying a judge to â€œjustifyâ€ (*â€œdeclare innocentâ€ in the PSA understanding*) a man who is guiltyâ€! kind of like what PSA says that God doesâ€!

Scripture is pretty clear about bribes.

Isaiah 5:22-23

22 *Woe to* those who are heroes in drinking wine
And valiant men in mixing strong drink,

23 *Who justify the wicked for a bribe,*
And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!

I realize that PSA doesnâ€™t say this directly, and that PSA supporters will object to this characterization. However, I couldnâ€™t unsee this once Iâ€™d seen it. Thus, I thought I should mention it as a point of intellectual honesty. PSA makes it sound like God was bribed with Jesusâ€™s blood to declare the wicked to be righteous. Thatâ€™s a problem.

Again, I realize thatâ€™s not what PSA supporters will say that PSA teaches. However, in my own personal opinion, itâ€™s uncomfortably close at the very least. At worst, itâ€™s spot on.

PSAâ€™s 4th Pillar

Now that weâ€™ve examined what â€œrighteousnessâ€ means, as well as the PSA view(s) of â€œjustificationâ€, weâ€™ll examine PSAâ€™s 4th pillar. In the intro article, PSAâ€™s 4th pillar is defined this way:

Once the substitution has been made, *the righteousness of the righteous substitute is transferred to the sinner, and the sinnerâ€™s wickedness (or sins) are transferred to the innocent substitute.* (*called â€œimputationâ€, and when it goes both ways, itâ€™s called â€œdouble imputationâ€.*)

Now, if â€œrighteousâ€ means â€œsinlessâ€, then the PSA position is somewhat coherent. If â€œrighteousnessâ€ is properly defined as â€œthe state of being in a proper relationship with God, man, and the lawâ€, itâ€™s slightly less coherent, but still works reasonably well. Neither seems to provide any *internal* contradiction, so then we need to see if they line up with scripture, which weâ€™ve mostly already done. The result didnâ€™t look good for PSA.

Thereâ€™s one more verse we need to look at, and itâ€™s from Ezekiel chapter 18. I recommend that you read the entire chapter, but this one verse is a reasonable summary:

Ezekiel 18:20

20 “The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.

The whole section is capped off by this pronouncement from God:

Ezekiel 18:29

29 “But the house of Israel says, “The way of the Lord is not right. Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right?”

The explicit teaching of God Himself is that *“the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself.”* He also rebukes those who say that His way is “not right”. Again, Ezekiel chapter 18 was the chapter that prompted the research project that became this series, and for this reason.

If we ignored every other verse we’ve looked at, just Ezekiel chapter 18 is a deathblow to PSA. Now, ignoring other verses is obviously a very bad idea, which is why we didn’t. However, the case for PSA is so paper-thin at this point (*even ignoring the contravening evidence*) that well, I can’t even think of a proper metaphor.

PSA: the verdict

We’ve already looked at the strongest PSA verses and found that, without exception, they simply don’t support PSA. **In fact, many of the ones that are said to support PSA most strongly “like Isaiah 53 or Leviticus 16 (The Day of Atonement Purification)” actually disprove it when read carefully.**

Obviously, that’s a problem for PSA.

I really didn’t think it would go this way.

When I started this research project, I thought it would end up being one of those things legitimately debated by the church with good arguments on both sides. There are no shortage of those debates, with each side having verses that lean in their direction. I’ve looked into some of those long-standing debates, and usually I can see the support for the side I don’t pick. That’s not the case with PSA.

During the course of this series, I think the research has effectively stripped away every last shred of support for PSA, even though that wasn’t my intention. I wanted to get to the truth, and it seems like the truth is that PSA has effectively no Biblical support at all.

As a pure illustration (*the politics of which I won't go into even if asked in the comments*), America is currently fighting a war in Iran. There are reports that the Iranians are painting airplanes on runways and/or using inflatable "helicopters" as decoys to get the US to waste missiles attacking decoys. (*Maybe they're false/AI, but the illustration still holds.*) PSA feels like that. It feels like a paper tiger, a painted plane, or an inflatable helicopter.

Worse, it seems like PSA is explicitly repudiated by scripture.

Obviously I remain open to changing my mind if someone can provide new evidence, or demonstrate that something in this series is wrong, etc. **But for me personally, unless new evidence is presented, I personally consider the case closed for PSA.**

Here's my own personal final verdict with the evidence I currently have, though of course you're welcome to disagree, and I might change my mind in the future if presented with new evidence.

PSA is blatantly anti-scriptural and impugns the character of God by saying that He is unable to forgive, and that God considers it just/righteous to punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty. God can forgive, and once someone truly repents, his sins will not be remembered against him. (Ezekiel 18:22)

PSA is ultimately unable to save us because it cannot remove our sin nor make us able to survive being in the presence of God.

Jesus didn't come to save us from the Father, or the Father's wrath against sin, or God's sense of justice. Jesus didn't need to save us from Himself (*what PSA teaches by entailment*). Instead, Jesus came to give us His life to cleanse us from our sins and their resulting corruption, so that we could be in His presence forever. He died so that we could be resurrected and so we could inherit incorruptible bodies on the New Earth and live forever with Him.

That's good news.

Conversely, "Jesus died so that He wouldn't have to kill you" (an entailment of PSA) doesn't really make a lot of sense. I find myself wondering if, perhaps, part of the reason that Christianity has been struggling in the last few centuries is because we're preaching the wrong gospel. Two hundred years ago, Christianity was ubiquitous in the West. That isn't the case today. There are obviously other factors, but perhaps this is one of them. The "gospel" that the modern church teaches (*Eastern Orthodox excepted*) is effectively a PSA model, though Catholics have a slightly stripped-down version of it.

I'd like for that to change.

I'd like for the gospel to make a return.

Now, you might accuse me of coming up with a brand new gospel in the 2020s and say that there's no way it's original. Well, to that, I suggest you look up the "Restored Icon Model" of how we're saved. The label is new-ish, but it describes a reality taught in the very first treatise on why Jesus came: "On the Incarnation of the Word" by Athanasius.

True, I contributed slightly in the realm of the mechanics of *how* it happens. But *what* happens is effectively what Athanasius taught. I'd actually recommend that you read his work *in full* "it's not that long" because it was eye-opening when I read it, which was near when I began the research for this series. That was the first time I'd ever heard a non-PSA explanation of the gospel, and it came from the early church.

Related: the next article in this series will be on the Early church fathers and if they taught PSA. Many PSA advocates say that PSA was taught from the very beginning, and we'll examine that claim in the next article.

With that said, I have one final thought before wrapping up.

Eternal Life is Knowing God

I was on the phone with my mother while writing this article and gave her a sketch of the research. Her immediate thought was of John 17:3, which I hadn't thought of before in this context. However, once she mentioned it, it really leapt off the page at me.

John 17:1-5

1 Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 "Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.

We've seen that "righteousness" means being in proper relationship with God, man, and the law, which is interesting to consider with the context of this next verse.

1 Corinthians 13:9-13

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. 13 But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

And a parallel passage:

1 John 3:2

2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that **when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.**

I'm about to make a logical leap that is, perhaps, a stretch. I want to be clear about that first, and here it is:

What if fully knowing God (*seeing Him as He is*) is what Jesus was talking about in John 17:3?

What if seeing God as He is, is the very thing that purges away all the corruption in our flesh, giving us the glorified and incorruptible bodies that we'll have forever?

Maybe?

Remember that being in God's presence is too much for our corrupted mortal bodies to bear, which we saw previously in Exodus 33 (*"No man can see Me and live"*). Theoretically, that's because God's glory purifies our corruption, and the corruption is so deeply a part of our flesh that we die as a result. God's solution was becoming man and then dying so He could become exactly like us so He could give us His life without killing us. (*which we talked about in [the 9th article](#).*) That allows us to survive being in His presence because of the Holy Spirit's indwelling, which (*currently only partially*) cleanses our corruption away and sustains our life.

The phrase "fully knowing God" sounds a little like being in His presence, which will then purge away the corruption in our flesh. It seems like 1 John 3:2 might be talking about that when it says: "when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is". Again, "seeing Him as He is" sounds like being in His presence, and we will be like Him "because" that happened.

Again, that's a logical leap, so I don't want to state it too strongly because what you just saw is the sum total of the evidence.

However, it makes a lot of sense to me.

(*Note: you have occurrences in scripture where prophets see God's throne, like Isaiah 6 and Revelation. However, those are all stated to be visions, not being in God's actual presence. The vision didn't result in this cleansing because it wasn't being in His actual presence*)

That said, it's time to wrap things up.

Conclusion

The idea of being "clothed in the righteousness of Christ" doesn't appear anywhere in scripture. Instead, we are "in Christ", and our righteousness is from Christ because of what He did to save us. The "clothing" language is a reference to Zechariah, and refers to having our sins "taken away". Additionally, it refers to the "righteous acts of the saints" in Revelation, and possibly Job as well.

- The words "just" and "righteous" are based on the same underlying Greek word.
- **"Righteous" doesn't mean "sinless"**. Rather, it means a man who *is in proper relationship with God, man, and the law.*
- **Righteousness** refers to *the state of being in proper relationship with God, man, and the law.*
- **Justify** means to *put someone into proper relationship with God, man, and the law.*
- **Justification** refers to *the act of putting someone into proper relationship with God, man, and the law.*

The Hebrew word *sadeq* as used of Christ in Isaiah 53:11 means: *will cause to turn to righteousness*, which seems like a clear parallel to *justify* and *justification*.

PSA's 4th pillar collapses under the weight of contravening scripture like Ezekiel 18 and Proverbs 24:24. Further, a proper understanding of *righteousness* also strikes against it, though not as strongly.

Further, according to the "snow-covered dunghill" view of justification that some PSA adherents hold, the 4th pillar doesn't actually fix anything between us and God, nor does it allow us to survive being in His presence. Finally, that same PSA view gets very close to bribing God. Perhaps it isn't technically, but it is extremely close.

We're coming to the end of this series, and I think there's only two articles left. The first is an article on what the early church taught on PSA. Many PSA adherents say that PSA was taught from the beginning. Thus, I collected those quotes and read all of every work that they come from to ensure I didn't take them out of context. That'll be the next article.

The final article in this series will be a summary/conclusion article, and possibly some final thoughts as well. At some point, I'll likely turn this whole series into a book and publish it as well. No idea when that'll be though.

I'll see you in the next article, and take care until then.

God Bless,
Berean Patriot