

Looking at it in another way, we see that God's law, which reflects His righteous nature, had been broken over and over, and the penalty promised for transgression was death. Each time God's law was broken, the question arose: would God keep His promise and execute His law? Would He be just and punish sin? For a long time it had looked as if sin was going unjudged and unpunished. But Christ's atonement showed God executing the penalty for sin on His own Son; thus Christ's death upheld God's law and displayed God's justice. It also showed how long-suffering God had been during the entire period before Christ.

In verse 26 God's justice is also displayed in His justification of a believing sinner. God does not simply declare a believing sinner righteous on no basis whatever; rather, God credits to that person the merit of Christ's righteousness, and then declares the person righteous. And the basis of God's declaration is Christ's atoning work.

In this way God shows Himself to be just at the very time He shows Himself to be gracious in declaring believing sinners righteous. In this way God is "just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

In verse 27 Paul asks: "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

Referring to Abraham's justification in Romans 4:2, Paul says, "If in fact Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God." And the reason for this is clear. In Romans 4:4 we read, "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation."

If we are declared righteous on the basis of observing the law, then we have something to boast about. We can then say, "I have in part earned my salvation, either by my imperfect obedience or by some contribution I have made to it. In some sense therefore, I deserve it."

When we receive wages for work, we do not view our pay as a gift, but as that which is owed us. And so if we do some work, however small, to obtain a righteous relation to God and His law, we feel that we have earned it and deserve it. On the basis of the principle of works, boasting is not excluded!

But if we are declared righteous on the basis of Christ's atoning work alone, received by faith alone, then we have nothing to boast about. The principle of faith excludes boasting, because it rests wholly on what Christ has done rather than on what we do.