

Sermons through

Romans

The Acropolis of the Christian Faith

Romans 3:21-26

Part One

With Study Questions

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Part One

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Introduction

A 19th century German theologian by the name of Hermann Olshausen referred to the passage before us as the “Acropolis of the Christian faith”—the Acropolis being that ancient citadel above the city of Athens containing buildings of monumental significance, including the Parthenon. One might think of it as a sort of fortress.

If Olshausen is correct (and one would be hard-pressed to find a theologian who would disagree) we would be forced to conclude that for the church to allow the message found in this passage to be corrupted or shrink into insignificance or obscurity puts the church in danger of losing its salt (Matthew 5:13) or having its lampstand removed entirely (Revelation 2:5).

The thought forces me to examine how far I allow myself to stray from the centrality of the Christian message. It should encourage us all to listen with a discerning ear to the Christian teachers which have gained prominence in our current age. How long would we listen before we heard some exposition of these powerful, yet gracious, words of the apostle?

Paul's seeming diatribe regarding the sinful estate of man found in the words leading up to this passage might be thought of as a tilling of the heart in preparation for these words and the Old Testament examples that will follow in the chapters to come. He has spent the bulk of three chapters cutting us off at the knees (or explaining the depth of our true affliction) that we might learn how to actually walk upright. It would appear that sin has so affected us, that we cannot even properly ascertain our problem and, therefore, have little appreciation for the solution. But the Master Physician (Matthew 9:12), having graciously informed us of our true disease, now sets forth the only cure.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets (Romans 3:21).

The Righteousness of God

“But now” designates a temporal shift. Something has now happened. Even the secular world recognizes this as the turning point in history. Redemptive history, prior to the birth of Christ, looked forward to this and we look back. Paul calls us to fix our eyes upon the revelation of the **“righteousness of God.”**

There is some debate as to what Paul means, at least here, by the **“righteousness of God.”** Some would argue that it primarily refers to the righteousness found in the character of God Himself—certainly not a far-fetched idea. But I choose to agree with Hodge, who explains this to be...

...the righteousness of which God is the author, which comes from him, which he gives, and which consequently is acceptable in his sight.¹

In the prior verse (Romans 3:20) Paul had explained how through the **“deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.”** How then will sinful men find themselves pardoned before a holy God? Assuming we

¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 88

recognize this as our greatest dilemma!

In this verse alone, we learn at least two things: One that it (the pardon of God) is **“apart from the law.”** In other words, it is not by human effort. Even if sinful men were inclined to seek after God (something Paul has already taught doesn't happen) all that man could offer God is his own sin. Secondly, we will learn that **“the Law and the Prophets”** gave witness to this message. Jesus did not come to establish some new religion. The Law and the Prophets, which is understood to be the whole of the Old Testament, chronicles the message of the redemption found in Christ from the beginning of history.

This both answers the naysayers who critique and dismiss the Christian faith as a sort of Johnny-come-lately religion without the historical chops of older systems but it also, and more importantly, opens the Old Testament as a book about Christ. Sometimes it is the Old Testament over the New that reveals the flesh upon the bones of the work of Christ. As a simple example, all four gospels give a very brief description of the crucifixion (usually simply the words “and they crucified Him.”) But Psalm 22 provides more information on that event than we might be comfortable with.

Paul continues to emphasize **“the righteousness of God”** in the following verse.

even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference (Romans 3:22)

An Indiscriminate Gift

It is a great and recurring theme of the Apostle Paul (both in his message and his own peace) that he be found in Christ...

...not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9b)

As we shall see, this righteousness is an indiscriminate gift. When Paul writes that there is “**no difference**” he is beckoning back to his prior lesson on the universal sinfulness of man. The Christian faith is tailor-made for sinners. The Westminster Confessions says it severely, comfortably and beautifully:

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.²

The Gift of Faith

And how is this great comfort made mine? It has been explained:

That the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel is to be attained by faith, not by works, not by birth, not by any external rite, not by union with any visible Church, but simply and only by believing on Christ, receiving and resting upon him.⁴

Some might say that it does discriminate—it is given to those who believe. The argument would be sensible if belief itself was not part of the gift—or at least the instrument God provides to deliver the gift.

Faith is not a vacuum constructed by man by which we seek to reach heaven in order to inhale and apprehend Christ and the blessings of eternal bliss; it is rather a hose provided by God with which he effectively douses us from the slumber of our spiritual death with the truth of His word that we might perceive our sin and come to know from whence our deliverance comes—which is Christ alone.

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Psalm 18:2).

² *The Westminster confession of faith*. XV, 4. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

^{3 4} Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 90

The rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:3) and we are called to believe:

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins (John 8:24).

Justifying Faith

What is a good definition of Justifying Faith? The Westminster Catechism gives a good one. Notice at the beginning that it is a saving grace.

Justifying faith is a saving grace, (Heb. 10:39) wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit (2 Cor. 4:13, Eph. 1:17–19) and word of God, (Rom. 10:14–17) whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, (Acts 2:37, Acts 16:30, John 16:8–9, Rom. 5:6, Eph. 2:1, Acts 4:12) not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, (Eph. 1:13) but received and rested upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, (John 1:12, Acts 16:31, Acts 10:43) and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation. (Phil. 3:9, Acts 15:11)⁵

And why is this so vital—so critical?

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

God’s Opinion

There is no “have” in the original. This verse literally reads “**for all sinned**” which could be a reference to the sin of Adam—that the human race is cursed via the sin of Adam. But before we feel some exoneration, since we are not Adam, and therefore mistakenly conclude that that would

⁵ *The Westminster larger catechism: With scripture proofs.* Question 72. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

be a sufficient argument before a holy God, let us recognize that

Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, (1 John 3:4) doth in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, (Rom. 2:15, Rom. 3:9, 19) whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, (Eph. 2:3) and curse of the law, (Gal. 3:10) and so made subject to death, (Rom. 6:23) with all miseries spiritual, (Eph. 4:18) temporal, (Rom. 8:20, Lam. 3:39) and eternal. (Matt. 25:41, 2 Thess. 1:9)⁶

And what does it mean to fall short of the glory of God? It mustn't be understood as falling short that we way might barely miss at horseshoes. To fall short means to fail—the way we might fall short of shooting an arrow to the moon. And when we think of the glory of God our thoughts might be drawn to the Mount Sinai and the glory of the Lord resting there (Exodus 24:16) and how the touching of the mountain incurred death (Exodus 19:12). To approach God with our own obedience—our own righteousness means only judgment.

But the glory of God also means to approval of God. We see this in the way Jesus uses the word in the Gospel of John:

...for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:43).

It is a great human expedition to be, as Calvin taught, summoned **“from the applause of a human court to the tribunal of heaven.”⁷** Sometimes I think I'm utterly delivered from the desire to find or feed off of the approval of men, and then other times, God will work in such a providential way as to horrifyingly reveal that I care more about what people think than I ought. It might be wise to utilize events like those as a way to recognize at a microscopic level, what it might be like to find the disapproval of God.

⁶ *The Westminster confession of faith*. VI, 6. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

⁷ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:22). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

Free Yet Paid

At first glance, this verse appears to be at conflict with itself. How does being justified “**freely,**” or as the ESV translates “**as a gift**” correspond with “redemption” which usually (though not always) includes a ransom or a payment? Simply put, it’s free for us but that does not mean there is no cost. As we sing our next hymn, let us begin to prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Supper and what we might “remember” by a contemplation of the payment provided and of which those elements are signs and seals:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).

knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

Questions for Study

1. Why do you think the Apostle Paul was so pointed about the depravity of man (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is meant by the phrase, “the righteousness of God” (pages 3)?
3. What are at least two things we learn in verse 21 (pages 3, 4)?
4. In what respect is the righteousness of God an indiscriminate gift (pages 4, 5)?
5. What is/is not faith? Discuss the catechism’s definition of faith. Look up the given references (pages 5, 6).
6. What does it mean to “fall short of the glory of God: (pages 6, 7)?
7. If justification is a free gift, how is it also a paid ransom (pages 7, 8)?