

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: Romans 3:21-26

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

Sunday, May 4th, 2014

As I shared last Sunday, I'm taking 4 Sundays to preach on "Gospel Growth." The elders have strongly sensed God leading us in a new direction in terms of how to implement our mission. It has always been our desire to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. That's the third line of our mission statement. And we now see that mission best served by church planting, rather than by seeking to grow in just one location. So our plan now, with God's guidance, is to continue establishing ourselves here in this neighborhood, and also begin planning for an additional location where we can hold services and eventually have a second church.

But this vision starts, not with buildings or programs, but with you and you and you and me . . . It must begin with personal revival in our own lives. It must begin with God igniting in our own hearts a great passion for the Gospel. That's what I preached on last Sunday. We can't do this or anything on our own, in our own strength. We need God's power. So we pray to Him. We cry out to Him to come and help us. We thank Him for what He is doing among us, for what He has done in our personal lives to give us a desire for Him. We pray that He will open our eyes more and more to see Him, to see His glory. We ask Him for power to comprehend the vast love of Christ for us. And we praise Him for His power. Those were the points we covered last week from Ephesians 1 and 3. And I hope you spent some time this past week on the homework assignment I gave you. I hope you took some time to meditate on those prayers of the Apostle Paul and pray those things for yourself. I encouraged you to write out a prayer to God along the same lines as what Paul prays for. If you didn't do that yet, please find time to do that soon. And I have another simple assignment that I'll give you at the end of today's sermon.

This morning I want to examine, simply, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we're talking about Gospel Growth, we need to be very clear on what the Gospel is. What is the central message that drives everything we do, including efforts to multiply ministries and small groups and locations for worship services? The third sermon in this series (next week) will be, "The Gospel for All Peoples." God has ordained that His Good News will go forth and eventually reach every ethnic group on the planet. And the fourth sermon will be, "Called to Gospel Multiplication." God is on the move, and He has called us to be active in the things He is doing.

This calling involves personal sacrifice of various kinds, but it's for the greatest cause.

So now let's try to unpack what the central message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is. To do so, we'll look at a very powerful paragraph of Scripture, found in Romans 3:21-26.

All of Scripture is God-breathed, and all of it is useful for us. But it's also the case that certain sections of the Bible are *especially* important. There's a unique concentration of Gospel truth.

This is one of those passages, and maybe the chief among them. In the notes of Martin Luther's Bible, there's a statement in the margin at this point in Romans where he wrote, "the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible."¹ Leon Morris said that this is "possibly the most important single paragraph ever written."² And others have made similar statements.

So we come to look at these verses, and we have to ask ourselves, What is so amazing about these few sentences? What gives them such weight? What is it that makes this paragraph so important? We are learning here the concepts that are most central to the Christian faith. If we spend our lives digging into these amazing truths, we will be greatly blessed.

I pray for revival among us. That's what last week's sermon was about—praying for personal revival. And I hope to see that increasingly among us, among many of us, among all of us—an increased passion for the Gospel. The truth of justification by faith alone, which is what Paul is teaching us here and is at the heart of the Gospel message, is a particular biblical truth that God has used to stir His people, awaken His people, and to draw people to Himself. J. I. Packer, in his introduction to James Buchanan's book on Justification, writes this: "justification by faith has been the central theme of the preaching in every movement of revival and religious awakening within Protestantism from the Reformation to the present day. The essential thing that happens in every true revival is that the Holy Spirit teaches the church afresh the reality of justification by faith, both as a truth and as a living experience."

That's what I hope God will do among us. I pray that the Holy Spirit will teach us afresh the reality that we are saved, not by

¹ Quoted in Moo, 218.

² Quoted in Stott, 109.

working for God, but by resting in Him and hoping in Him. And I pray that this won't just be an intellectual affirmation we make, but a heartfelt conviction that impacts our daily lives.

What do you do when you're tempted to sin? What do you do when you feel discouraged, when you feel anxious, when you have the yucky feeling of disapproval from others, or when you find yourself clamoring to please people? What do you cling to in times of trial?

Friends, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the rock solid hope that will see us through this life. With the world, the flesh and the devil waging war against our souls, the truth of the Gospel is the powerful hope that will carry us through and bring us out on the other side into an eternity of perfect peace and joy and pleasure with God.

Let's turn our attention, now, to this paragraph. The recurring theme throughout these verses is the righteousness of God. It's mentioned in verses 21-22, and also in verses 25-26. And it's also important to realize that the words "just, justified, and justifier," are all from the same Greek word. It's awkward to try to bring this across in English, although John Stott tries to do it by summarizing justification in this way: "It is [God's] just justification of the unjust, his righteous way of 'righteousing' the unrighteous."³³ "Righteousing" is not a word in English, but that way of saying it does get across the connections in Paul's wording of these things. This passage is about the righteousness of God, and how God upholds His righteousness even as He declares to be righteous individuals who are not righteous.

What I want to do, then, is lead us through these verses by making 6 statements about the righteousness of God.

The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.

This first takes us back to Romans 1:17 where Paul used this phrase, "the righteousness of God." "For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Martin Luther had a lot of trouble with that text. He read that as the condemning justice of God (the judgment of God against sinners), and therefore he could not see how that was good news. But in 1515 when he was lecturing on Romans, he came to see that the righteousness of God there is not a reference to God judging sinners, but rather a

³³ Stott, 109.

reference to a righteousness *from* God which He bestows upon sinners when they believe. And, of course, that is very good news. And what we're encountering in Romans 3:21 is also very good news.

Paul has written at length about human sinfulness. He concluded the section in 3:20 by saying that works of the law cannot justify. The law shows us our sin, but can in no way clear us of our guilt. And then it's as though the dark clouds separate, and a bright beam of sunshine pierces through the darkness, and the shout of hope is spoken in 3:21, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . ."

You see, this is picking up right where 1:17 left off. But if it wasn't for 1:18 – 3:20, we wouldn't understand this the way we need to. We have to understand our sin. We have to understand our depravity. We have to understand our unrighteousness. And then, when we're told again about the righteousness of God that comes to us by faith, we leap for joy! And now that we see the inability of the law to save, we're told of this righteousness of God that has been manifested apart from the law. A new day has dawned in the history of salvation. Christ has come. He lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death, and rose on the third day. And that's what Paul is alluding to. "But now [now that Christ has come] the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law . . ." This is a new era in salvation history. There was the old covenant of the law, but now we've entered the time of the new covenant.

But lest we think of these two eras with too sharp of a contrast, Paul immediately adds, "although the Law and the prophets bear witness to it." The Old Testament pointed forward to these events as the fulfillment of God's promises. Paul said something very similar at the very beginning of this letter (1:2) when he described the gospel as something God "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures." Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.

The righteousness of God is called into question because He passed over former sins.

To understand this paragraph rightly, I believe we have to see two different dimensions of the righteousness of God. On the one hand, Paul uses this phrase to refer to the righteousness from God which He bestows upon sinners. That's what had such an impact on Luther in his study of Romans 1:17. And that's what "righteousness of God" refers to here in 3:21-22. It is a

righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

But the references to the “the righteousness of God” in verses 25-26 speak to another dimension of God’s righteousness. Now Paul has in mind God’s upright moral character, including His justice in dealing with sin. Can you see what’s going on in verses 25-26? Can you hear in the background the objections that might be raised, calling into question God’s justice?

Paul has spoken about justification, redemption, and propitiation, all of which we’re going to come back to in a moment. And then he says, starting in the middle of verse 25, “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

A prime example here is King David, who was a man after God’s own heart, but also sinned terribly against God. David committed adultery with Bathsheba. And then in his attempt to avoid blame He ended up having Bathsheba’s husband killed in battle. And then Nathan came to rebuke David for these horrible sins, and David finally responded by admitting, “I have sinned against the Lord” (1 Samuel 12:13). To which Nathan responded, “*The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.*” Now the question is: How can Nathan say that? On what basis can God forgive David’s sin? How can God be just and also forgive these atrocities? How can He refrain from killing David for these sins?

For many generations God passed over these former sins. But in the death of Christ He vindicated His righteousness by showing that He was not going to leave those sins unaccounted for. He had not simply ignored those sins. He didn’t just look the other way. He had a plan. And as Christ hung on that cross God poured out His wrath against sin. He IS righteous. He IS just. He deals with sin in a way that upholds His justice and His glory.

God continues to forgive sins today, in the lives of those who trust in His Son. We are all sinners, as Paul says here in verse 23. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That’s kind of a summary of 1:18 – 3:20. In 1:23 he spoke of those who “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” To fall short of the glory of God, to exchange the glory of God for other things—this is the essence of sin. And we’re all guilty. We have failed to fix our gaze on the beautiful greatness of God, and instead we’ve sought for satisfaction in many other things. Thus, God’s glory is

dishonored. His reputation is at stake, if He doesn't do something about it. So how can He justify sinners? How can He reckon as righteous those who are unrighteous? How can He give an eternal inheritance to individuals who have dishonored Him?

Imagine a king who has rebels rallying outside his gate. They have signs that say, "We hate the king." They shout out their chants, "Down with the king." They delight in disobeying the king's laws. And at any moment the king could tell his armed men to fire on those rebels and kill them all. But instead the king has his armed men escort those rebels into his own banquet hall. He dines with them, befriends them, wins their hearts, forgives them for their acts of treason, adopts them as his own sons and daughters, and makes them heirs of his kingdom.

What might people say about that king? They might say, "Well, he's kind. He's forgiving. But he's not just! He didn't do anything about the rebellion. How could he let that go without a response?" That's precisely the dilemma addressed in this paragraph of Scripture. How can God be just, while He also justifies sinners? And this leads to the next point, where we'll look at the answer to that question.

The righteousness of God is seen in His wrath against sin.

This was Luther's fear, that the righteousness of God simply meant God's judgment of sinners. And therefore Luther was so happy to discover that the righteousness of God is a righteousness from God, credited to sinners by faith (1:17; 3:21-22). But there is still this dimension of God's righteousness which refers to His justice, His holiness, His just wrath against sin (3:25-26). Here's how He upholds His righteous character.

Verse 25 says that God put Christ "forward as a propitiation by his blood." The rest of verse 25, and also verse 26 explain how this demonstrated God's righteousness. It was through this act of putting Christ forward as a propitiation. So we need to try to understand what this word "propitiation" means.

There has been debate over this word, partly because some scholars don't like the idea of God's wrath. And they don't like the idea of God being wrathful toward His own Son. But this idea of propitiation speaks of Christ bearing the wrath of God, appeasing God's wrath, making God propitious (favorable) toward those who have faith.

God does hate sin. Make no mistake about it. Romans 1:18 said that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against

all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men . . .” 2:25 said, “because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” And 3:5 also referred to the righteousness of God in terms of His wrath.

But, you see, now we’re being told how God upholds His glory and His justice and His righteousness, while at the same time justifying sinners. He does not wink at sin. He does not sweep it under the rug and pretend like it didn’t happen. He deals with it fully. He punishes all sin in such a way that there will be no doubt whose glory is preeminent in the universe. There will be no doubt about His perfect moral character. Many, sadly, will be punished for their own sin, eternally in hell.

Others, though, as this passage speaks of, will be justified and redeemed through Jesus Christ. Here’s what happens in their case: God’s wrath against their sin is directed toward Jesus Christ as Christ died on the cross. God punishes all sin. But the good news for those who trust in Jesus is that our sin was punished on the cross. God unleashed His fierce anger against sin upon His own beloved Son. This is the meaning of propitiation.

I was thinking about this during the week, in light of a frightening experience I had on Monday. Fortunately, everything turned out alright. But it was a terrifying and emotional incident. I had our 9 month old son, Micah, in a stroller at the top of our driveway. We were gonna go for a jog together. Stacy was leaving in the van at the same time, and because of where I was standing, she backed out of the garage at a bit of an angle and almost got stuck. I turned my head, concerned, wondering if I needed to help her, and in my distraction I let go of the stroller. When I turned my head back, I saw the stroller, with Micah strapped into it, rolling down the driveway toward the street. I sprinted after him, the stroller crossed the street (fortunately there were no cars), it bumped up onto our neighbor’s driveway and tipped over. Micah was crying as I unstrapped him, but he was OK. It was a miracle that he wasn’t hurt.

I felt so bad as a father. Something terrible could have happened to my son, and it was my fault. About 20 minutes later as I was talking to Stacy about all this, I just burst into tears thinking about what could have happened. I was sobbing. I love my son, and it made my heart ache just thinking that I caused him pain and that my mistake might have caused him great harm.

Later this made me think about our heavenly Father and His beloved Son, who died on the cross. This was no accident.

The Father ordained for His Son to hang on that cross. My scare on Monday helped me to appreciate in a new way that heartache that the Father felt as He watched His Son suffer.

So don't think about this in a simplistic way. This was not a mere transaction. Nor was it a charade. God, the Father, had to punish His own Son, His perfect Son, had to punish Him to the point of a humiliating death. So we must consider the heartache of the Father as well as the great suffering of the Son. This is what had to happen in order to uphold God's justice while He also justifies sinners like us.

Let's look next at justification and redemption.

The righteousness of God and justification

Paul packs into this passage some powerful imagery. These may sound like abstract theological terms (justification, redemption), but they are actually giving us some very concrete illustrations of what God does for sinners. The term "justification" is a courtroom term. To be justified is to be declared righteous in the courtroom of God. Remember, these are the same word in Greek—just, justify, righteous. To justify is to declare righteous. So imagine yourself standing before God in His courtroom. You know that you're a sinner. The law has shown you that ever so clearly. You know that you deserve only punishment from God because of your treason against Him. You fear what will happen to you when the gavel pounds the desk, and you prepare to hear the word, "Guilty!"

But instead, the gavel sounds, and to your amazement you hear the judge declaring, "Not guilty." But how can this be! How can a just judge pronounce such a verdict for one who is guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt? This, again, is the objection that might be brought against God's justice. If He justifies the ungodly, how can He still be just?

Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD." So it's an abomination to justify the wicked. But that's what God is doing here, isn't it?!

Well this, again, is why the idea of propitiation is so important. God poured out His wrath against sin when He put His own Son forward as a propitiation by His blood. It's not as though the judge simply decided to ignore sin. But He put a substitute in our place to take the punishment we deserve. So even as the pronouncement is made, "Not guilty," and you breath an amazing

sigh of relief, the judge also pronounces, “My Son is sentenced to death on your behalf.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, it’s “in him (Christ) that we become the righteousness of God.” There is a crediting of our sin to Christ, and of His righteousness to us.

I was skimming through some material for evangelistic Bible studies this week, and I came across this illustration. Imagine that on this DVD is recorded everything about your entire life. If we just played the highlight reel, it might look pretty good. But there’s also the stuff that you’re ashamed of. The dark secrets of your life that you’d rather nobody know about. Everything is here. God sees it all. This is what separates us from God. My hand represents us. The ceiling represents God. It’s all of this sin that separates us from God. But here’s what happened at the cross. All the weight of my sinful life was placed on Jesus. He was punished for my sin, and He fully paid that penalty. And now, my sin no longer separates me from God. God sees me as perfect.

This is the picture that should come to mind when we hear the word justification—being declared “Not guilty” by the supreme judge, because Christ took our sin and gave us His righteousness.

The righteousness of God and redemption

This is yet another powerful image. With the word redemption, we are no longer in the courtroom, but at the prison cell where the slaves are held captive. To redeem is to pay the price to release one who is in bondage. Paul kind of mixes these metaphors together in verse 24. He speaks first of justification (sinners are justified by his grace as a gift), and that calls to mind the courtroom setting. And then, as we’re scratching our heads wondering how this declaration of “Not guilty, but righteous” can be pronounced over us, and how God can give this gracious gift to us, we’re told then in the second half of verse 24 that this comes “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” We are set free because Christ Jesus paid the price for our liberation.

Mark 10:45 uses a similar word, where it says, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a *ransom* for many.” The word “ransom” and the word “redemption” are related in the Greek. And so the picture comes together of this gracious gift which is given to us, and the One who paid the price to purchase it.

This concept of redemption makes me think of Hosea in the Old Testament, who went to purchase his wife, Gomer, out of slavery. “And the LORD said to me, ‘Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD

loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.’ So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. And I said to her, ‘You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you.’” (Hosea 3:1-3)

What a vivid picture of redemption. We are slaves to sin, and Jesus pays the price to release us from that bondage. He died on the cross, He suffered God’s wrath, He took the punishment, and the prison doors fly open for us to walk into freedom.

Even as we’re in bondage to sin, enslaved to our own passions, controlled by worldly desires, Jesus Christ breaks down the door of our prison and compels us to come out into the light of day in His presence.

The righteousness of God comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

The last thing for us to observe and emphasize this morning is the additional amazing fact that God gives us this gracious gift, by no achievement of our own, but through faith in Jesus Christ (v. 22, 25, 26). And, of course, this ties right in with everything we’ve already been seeing here. Who paid the price? Jesus. Who bore God’s wrath? Jesus. And therefore what is there for us to pay? Nothing! How much of God’s wrath must we suffer? None!

There is nothing left for us to pay, nothing left for us to achieve, nothing we must accomplish to earn this gift. If we tried to work for it, it would no longer be a gift, but a wage. And so we connect with this gift simply by faith. We don’t come to God with something in our hands to offer Him. Rather, we come to Him with empty hands to receive from Him. We don’t look at Him as an employer. Rather, we look to Him as a rescuer. We look to Him as the One who comes to open up our prison doors and give us a new life with Him.

We’ve seen this morning the summary and center of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the God who judges sin by putting forth His own Son as a propitiation by His blood, and therefore this God can justly justify sinners. Apply this to the various situations of your life. Look at every relationship, every task, every opportunity, every hardship, every temptation, every blessing, in light of the fact that we have redemption in Christ Jesus. We’re set free. We are declared righteous in God’s sight. We’re justified. And this happens to us, not by any work of our own, but simply by trusting in Jesus. And so we praise our great God, who is both just and also the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Your assignment for this week is to think through this Gospel message and figure out how you would summarize it in your own words. There are some big words here in the text. You might use some of these words. Or you might think of simpler words to express the same thing. Also think about your own story of how God saved you. And then put together an outline of how you would share that with someone else. I'm not talking about a 30 minute lecture. I'm talking about a casual, personal, 5 minute conversation. How would you tell someone, in about 5 minutes, about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and how that has changed your life? Think about that, and then find someone to share that with. Maybe your spouse, or your children, or a friend in your small group, or an unbelieving friend. Let's continue to pray for a Gospel passion in our lives, and let's think about how to clearly express that passion to others, and let's look for opportunities to do so.