

Romans 3:21-26

How Can A Person Be Right with God?

The Protestant Reformation was an amazing work of God

- If you have never taken the time to study what transpired during these years, you should

One of the major issues to arise during the Reformation was the issue of justification by faith alone

- Some would say that this was the issue of the Reformation

The Reformation could really be summarized by the use of five “solas”¹

- Sola Scriptura (“by Scripture alone”)
- Sola fide (“by faith alone”)
- Sola gratia (“by grace alone”)
- Solus Christus (“Christ alone”)
- Soli Deo gloria (“glory to God alone”)

The religion of the day assumed that one was saved by works and personal merit

- But God raised up men and women to challenge this notion

Yet we seldom stop to think about the doctrinal and theological battles that have waged over the centuries

- Many times, we are very content to believe what we believe, not really paying attention to what it cost others

The book of Romans was instrumental during the Reformation

- The issue of justification by faith arose primarily out of expositions of the book of Romans
- This highlights further the importance of this book that we are studying

We have closed out the opening section of Romans (1:18-3:20)

- A total of 64 verses were listed in our English Bibles

This passage chronicled man’s condemnation

- Sinful mankind is unable to save himself
- No religious work – circumcision, physical lineage, or possession of the God-given Scriptures – can earn favor with God

The net result of this opening section is that sinful mankind is found to be unrighteous

- He has sinned, thereby bringing God’s wrath and judgment upon himself

So we ask ourselves, “Can a sinner be made right with God?”

- Although we all deserve God’s wrath, is there any way that this can be avoided?

The great news is that the book of Romans doesn’t stop at 3:20

- The epistle of Romans isn’t a book predominantly about God’s wrath
- Rather, it is a book about God’s righteousness

In this morning’s message, we answer the question, “How can a person be right with God?”

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_solas.

Let's read Romans 3:21-26

The apostle Paul begins to shed some light on the critical issue of how sinners can be right with God

- This question was asked as early as the book of Job
- In Job 9:2, Job asks the question, “**how can a man be in the right before God?**”

Romans 3:21-26 has been called “**possibly the most important single paragraph ever written**”²

- This is a Text that we need to study with great respect and reverence

Paul will give us four elements of God's righteousness which will help us to see the bigger picture of God's sovereign plan of salvation

- The revelation of God's righteousness (3:21)
- The acquisition of God's righteousness (3:22-23)
- The cost of God's righteousness (3:24-25a)
- The justness of God's righteousness (3:25b-26)

I. **The revelation of God's righteousness (3:21)**

²¹ But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested.

Before we proceed any further, I think it would be prudent to go back and review the overall theme of the book of Romans in 1:16-17

- “**For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’**”

We are told in verse 17 that “**the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith**”

- Without God making His righteousness known to us, we would not know it otherwise
- We couldn't discover it on our own

This theme of “**righteousness**” will be repeated throughout Romans

- It is definitely one of the most important words in the epistle

“**righteousness**” lies at the heart of the Gospel

- Mankind is sinful; we are “in the wrong”
- But God holds the solution of how sinners can be “made right”

There is a major break in Paul's logic by the inclusion of the phrase, “**but now**”

- Up to this point in the epistle, we have looked at some tragically bad news
- Sinners stand condemned before God!

Paul's first goal was to bring the entire world under the judgment of God

- His second goal is to broadcast the only means of salvation through Christ³

“**but now**” acts as a bridge to cross from man's condemnation to man's justification

- These two words are powerful words, signifying a huge change in the sinner's position before the Lord

² Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 173.

³ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse*, 92.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once commented, “there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than just these two words, ‘But now’”⁴

Romans 1:18-3:20 was dominated by the thought of God’s wrath

- Romans 3:21-5:21 is dominated by the thought of God’s righteousness⁵

Here in Romans 3:21, we are told that God’s righteousness was manifested “**apart from the Law**”

- God’s righteousness was revealed separate from the giving of the Law

In other words, the Law was never intended to produce righteousness in any individual

- The Law was given to show mankind just how sinful he was
- The Law was designed to point to our need of a Savior

Yet here is where mankind has stumbled

- Not just Jews, but Gentiles as well

Sinners think that God rewards our religious achievements

- Trying to keep the Ten Commandments, for example

But unless you keep the Law perfectly, trying to obey it does not profit you at all

- As Romans points out on numerous occasions, we are all sinners
- We have all come woefully short of perfection

Because of Calvary, the righteousness of God “**has been manifested**”

- That one act has lasting effects through today⁶

being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

Furthermore, the righteousness of God was “**witnessed by the Law and the prophets**”

- This phrase, “**the Law and the prophets,**” was a way of referring to the entire Old Testament

Paul is insinuating that the Old Testament bears witness to the righteousness of God

- This wasn’t Paul’s invention

In Romans 4, we will see Paul reach back into the Old Testament and cite Abraham and David as two individuals who enjoyed and experienced the righteousness of God

The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God

- The Gospel is the Good News of God’s intervention in the lives of sinful humanity

There is a way for sinners to be made right with God

- But what is that way?
- As Job asked, “**how can a man be in the right before God?**” (9:2)

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁶ Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Romans*, 41.

II. The acquisition of God's righteousness (3:22-23)

²² even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe;

The way to obtain the righteousness of God is really quite simple

- Romans 3:20 has already ruled out the possibility of working for our salvation

In verse 22, the apostle Paul tells us how to be right with God, “**through faith in Jesus Christ**”

- “**faith**” is the means by which we acquire God’s righteousness

This is the first time in the book of Romans where the object of faith is mentioned⁷

In what do we place our faith?

- The Bible calls us to place faith “**in Jesus Christ**”
- He is the only reliable and trustworthy object of faith

We live our lives by faith, whether we realize it or not

- We go to sleep, trusting that the locks on the doors will keep thieves away
- We sleep soundly, trusting that the alarm clock will wake us up
- We eat breakfast, trusting that there is nothing poisonous in the cereal box
- We get into our car, trusting that the seat belt will protect us in an accident
- We arrive at work, trusting that a chair will support our weight all day long

Every day, we place faith in various objects

- Door locks
- Alarm clock
- Cereal manufacturers
- Seat belts
- Office chair

But none of these is the object which will bring about the righteousness of God

- Jesus Christ alone fills that void
- He alone can bring about the righteousness of God

Salvation is offered “**for all those who believe**”

- Henceforth, the means of salvation isn’t available to a select few
- The Gospel invitation goes forth to everyone

What if the means of salvation was something different than belief?

- “all those who can see 20/20”
- “all those who can jump two feet in the air”
- “all those who earn more than 80,000 a year”

If these were the determining factors whereby someone obtains salvation, then it wouldn’t be available to everyone

- But God requires simple, childlike faith

“Faith is simply ‘the hand of the heart’”⁸

⁷ Morris, 175.

⁸ Godet, quoted in Harrison, 41.

Paul summarizes it well in Philippians 3:8-9, “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 in order that I may gain Christ, 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”

- Paul experienced God’s righteousness, apart from the Law

for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Why does God require only simple trust?

- The end of verse 22 says, “for there is no distinction”

We are all guilty sinners, worthy of God’s judgment and wrath

- There is no distinction between Jews and Greeks
- There is no distinction between males and females
- There is no distinction between adults and children

“No one is good enough to saved; no one is so evil that he cannot be saved”⁹

Romans 3:23 is a very familiar verse to most of us

- I would dare say that many of us have this verse memorized
- It is part of the Romans Road Gospel presentation

Let’s look to see what Paul writes in this familiar verse, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

First, “all have sinned”

- Paul uses a simple past tense of the verb to give a “snapshot” perspective
- Every day of our lives, we could see these pictures of our sinfulness

Second, “(all) fall short of the glory of God”

- Paul uses a present tense of the verb to portray continuous action
- This would give the meaning, “all have sinned and are continuously falling short of the glory of God”

Unbelievers need to realize that they are always falling short of God’s glory

- There is no remedy on their own
- God is their only solution

God created Adam so that he could have fellowship with Him

- That was fine until the Fall
- Then Adam began to hide himself from God

But the hope of the Gospel is that the intimate fellowship can be restored

- The broken relationship can be reconciled

How does a sinner obtain the righteousness of God?

- Not through the law
- But through faith

⁹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Romans 1-8*, 207.

III. The cost of God's righteousness (3:24-25a)

²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace

What is the cost of the righteousness of God?

- That depends on whose perspective you are considering

From God's perspective, it demanded His very own Son, Jesus Christ

- From a human perspective, it is free

Notice that believers are described as "**being justified**"

- They can't justify themselves (active voice)
- They must have justification applied to them (passive voice)

Keep in mind that the verb for "**being justified**" is the same root word used for righteousness

- This is a forensic term
- It is the language of the law court¹⁰

Justification is the act of **declaring** a sinner righteous

- It does not imply **making** a sinner righteous

"To be justified is to be acquitted by God from all charges that could be brought against a person because of his or her sins"¹¹

- Every single accusation that could be leveled against you is totally erased in the act of justification

It is the opposite of condemnation!

There are two aspects of justification

- To be declared righteous – although we were formally unrighteous, wicked, and sinful
- To be declared not guilty – to have our sins forgiven

We also need to make a distinction between justification and sanctification¹²

- Justification is a one-time event – it affects our standing before God
- Sanctification is an ongoing event – it affects our character

Sinners are justified – declared righteous – "**as a gift by His grace**"

- Not by something they do for themselves
- But by something God does for them

If God justified sinners on the basis of works, how much would be enough?¹³

- Would there ever be assurance that you had done enough?

Yet when Divine righteousness is presented as a gift, we know that it is enough

- Because God is the One who has set the limits

¹⁰ Harrison, 42.

¹¹ Moo, 227.

¹² William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Romans*, 130.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentaries, Romans*, 97.

Salvation is always portrayed as a gift

- It is something to be received
- Not something to be earned

But why is this so?

- Why is salvation a gift?

First, if we had a part in salvation, we could boast and brag

- But with a gift, no one can boast – except in what God has done

Second, the value of salvation is so high that we couldn't attain it on our own

- The free nature of salvation ensures that everyone can receive it

Grace isn't free because it's cheap

- Grace is free because we could have it no other way

Grace is the unmerited, undeserved favor of God

- There was nothing in us that warranted or merited God to save us
- It was something we totally didn't deserve

Grace is the reason why God grants forgiveness to undeserving, rebellious sinners

- **“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”**
(Rom 5:8)

From God's perspective, justification is a matter of grace

- From man's perspective, justification is a matter of faith¹⁴

through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Furthermore, sinners are justified **“through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus”**

Another rich theological term in this passage is that of **“redemption”**

- This word has a great heritage from the Old Testament

To redeem means to buy back or purchase

- So what was purchased?
- Who made the purchase?

In the Old Testament, redemption could be a good summary word for what God did to the nation of Israel

- He rescued and redeemed Israel from their slavery to Egypt

Sin is portrayed as spiritual slavery

- Sin produces a condition whereby we can't free ourselves
- We are hopeless unless someone intervenes and pays the price to set us free

¹⁴ Moo, 228.

That is precisely what God has done for us in Christ

- He has intervened, paid the price, and effected our release¹⁵
- He has delivered us from our sin

Listen to the words of 1 Corinthians 6, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? ²⁰For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19-20)

John Bunyan describes the effect that God’s grace had upon his own heart

- “As I was walking up and down in the house, as a man in a most woful state, that word of God took hold of my heart, Ye are ‘justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 3:24). But oh, what a turn it made upon me! Now was I as one awakened out of some troublesome sleep and dream, and listening to this heavenly sentence, I was as if I had heard it thus expounded to me: Sinner thou thinkest that because of thy sins and infirmities I cannot save thy soul, but behold my Son is by me, and upon him I look, and not on thee, and will deal with thee according as I am pleased with him.”¹⁶

Bunyan was a man who was gripped by God’s grace

- This passage here in Romans 3:24 was used of God to awaken Bunyan out of his spiritual slumber

I pray that God would do that work in our lives here this morning

²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation

Jesus Christ was “displayed publicly as a propitiation”

- This isn’t a word that we use often in the 21st century
- But it is a very significant word in the Bible

A simple definition of “propitiation” is “a sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God”

- Romans 1:18-3:20 has proven that all people – Jews and Gentiles – are guilty of sin
- As such, we deserve the wrath of God for our sins

But that’s a problem

- There is nothing that we can do to thwart God’s wrath

Here is where Jesus comes into the picture

- Jesus Himself became the sacrifice that averted the wrath of God
- Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God for all those who would believe

During the Old Testament, God set up a yearly reminder of the need for sacrifice

- On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the high priest would sacrifice an animal
- He would then take the blood of that animal into the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant resided

The high priest would then sprinkle some of the blood on the mercy seat inside the holy of holies

- This was to represent the atoning of sins

¹⁵ Alan J. Johnson, *Everyman’s Bible Commentary, Romans*, 77.

¹⁶ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 257ff.

It could be that Paul is showing Christ to be the antitype of the mercy seat of the Old Testament

- He is the focus of provision of atonement for His people¹⁷

The Greek word here for “**propitiation**” is the same one used to translate the Hebrew word for mercy seat¹⁸

Think of being under the Old Covenant

- Every year, the high priest had to enter the holy of holies
- This ritual was repeated every single year

But the sins were not really taken away until the cross

- The ritual was simply a temporary covering

Listen to these words from the book of Hebrews, “**But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins**” (Heb 10:3-4)

Think about this¹⁹

- Because of God’s justice, He required propitiation for sins
- Because of His mercy, He provided propitiation for sins

in His blood through faith.

Paul continues to stack up the vivid details of Christ’s sacrifice, which was the only means of acceptance by the holy God

The mention of “**His blood**” reminds us that a sacrifice needed to take place

- As Hebrews 9:22 tells us, “**without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness**”

Redemption was no simple, cheap matter

- It cost our Lord deeply
- It cost our Lord His very life

In an amazing statement, Paul uses the economy of words to state two amazing truths

- “**in His blood**” – a summary of Christ’s sacrifice
- “**through faith**” – a summary of our response

“Propitiation cannot be had without blood, yet propitiation is not operative without faith”²⁰

- Paul summarizes well this important theological truth

We should be the most grateful, humble people on the planet

- **We have our sins forgiven**
- **We have been set free from sin’s authority**

But oftentimes, we are proud people

- **We lack the humility that should characterize our lives**

¹⁷ Moo, 236.

¹⁸ Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace*, 108.

¹⁹ W.H. Griffith-Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 115.

²⁰ McClain, 109.

Time and time again, Paul wants to remind us that salvation is never through or by works

- It is a gift that can be accepted through faith

But even the faith that we exercise is a gift from God

- So we can take credit for nothing

It's no wonder that this section of Romans has been called the very heart of the epistle of Romans

- These six verses exude profound Divine truths

“Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus...²²let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19, 22)

One author said that every Christian needed to memorize these six verses (Rom 3:21-26)

- For in them is found the very core of Christianity

IV. The justness of God's righteousness (3:25b-26)

This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

It could be argued that God was not righteous during the Old Testament

- It seems that He allowed sin to be done without doing anything about it

Sure, there were times when God struck individuals dead for their sin

- But as a whole, God didn't do that
- Someone may very well argue, “Was God righteous to allow sin to go unpunished?”

We must realize that God didn't allow sin to go unpunished

- The work of redemption was retrospective as well as prospective²¹
- In other words, the cross reached backwards as well as forwards²²

This should boggle our minds

- The cross stands as the pivotal point of all time
- It divides B.C. from A.D.

The cross stands as ample truth that God was completely righteous all along

- He didn't forfeit His righteousness during those years of the Old Testament

Paul states that for nearly 4000 years, God “**passed over the sins previously committed**”

- He merely postponed His judgment of sin until the cross

At various times during the OT, God executed judgment on a nation or individual

- He did this to remind humanity that judgment was coming
- Sinners could not do as they pleased; judgment day was coming quickly

²¹ Bruce, 102.

²² Hendriksen, 134.

God could have been righteous by immediately striking down every sinner when he/she sinned

- But then no one could be saved since they would be struck dead immediately for their sin!

But God was showing His compassion and longsuffering by postponing His judgment on sin

- Of course, His patience has been misunderstood to be indifference toward sin

The very fact that the Savior died on the cross is ample proof that God is righteous

- God didn't postpone His judgment on sin indefinitely
- There was a place and time when He paid the penalty of sin for all those who would believe

God can't forgive sin apart from the cross of Calvary

- Believers under the Old Covenant were saved "on credit"²³

A beautiful verse is given in Psalm 85:10, "Lovingkindness and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other"

- What a beautiful description of what took place at the cross!

Justice demanded punishment for sin

- Mercy provided time until Christ could die on the cross

²⁶ for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time,

For the second time in two verses, we are told that God took actions to demonstrate His righteousness

- Jesus' act of propitiation did not primarily demonstrate His love
- The act of propitiation was primarily to demonstrate His righteousness and justice²⁴

Not only did the cross demonstrate and prove God's righteousness before Calvary

- The cross also demonstrates God's righteousness after Calvary

So what is the result of Calvary?

- Look at the last phrase of verse 26

that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Let's imagine God executing immediate justice on all sinners before the cross

- Would God be righteous in doing so? Yes!
- But this wouldn't have highlighted His mercy²⁵

The cross, however, shows us both aspects of God's justice and mercy

- Both are highlighted perfectly

²³ McClain, 110.

²⁴ Ibid., 109.

²⁵ Morris, 184.

God is shown to be “just” and “the justifier”

- He is “just” and righteous in that He didn’t compromise His character in dealing with sin
- He is “the justifier” in that He is the only One who can justify a sinner
 - o The amazing reality is that Jesus Christ Himself became the sacrifice to turn away God’s wrath from wicked sinners

The final phrase of verse 26 – “of the one who has faith in Jesus” – is a repetition of what we have seen already

- It is all contingent upon personal belief and trust in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross

In Homer’s *Iliad*, the great warrior Hector was about to go to war against the Greeks²⁶

- But before he left home, Hector wanted to hold his son in his arms and bid him farewell
- For all that he knew, it may be the last time that he would see his son

But Hector’s armor terrified his son so much that the son would not come near his own father

- Instead, the son ran to his nurse

The father laughed out loud and removed his helmet, exposing his true identity

- The son recognized his father and ran to embrace him

Perhaps when you think of God, you are terrified of Him

- You run from Him, much like the son did with Hector
- You flee from God’s presence, much like Adam did in the Garden of Eden

Looking only at Romans 1:18-3:20, we would have plenty of reason to be terrified of God

- He is a God of wrath
- He is a righteous God who cannot condone sin

But God has revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ

- We see more than His wrath
- We see His love, patience, mercy, grace, and righteousness

Instead of running away from God, run to God

- Embrace Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior

He is your only hope of salvation

- He is the only One who can rescue you from sin’s dominion, power, and control

Jesus Christ gave His life so that you would never have to face God’s wrath

- What is required of you is simple, childlike trust

Isaac Watts penned the words to the song, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, over 300 years ago

- Listen to these words
- Listen to how this man understood what Paul has been discussing in this section of Romans²⁷

²⁶ MacArthur, 200-01.

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_I_Survey_the_Wondrous_Cross

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God,
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down,
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an off'ring far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.