

Righteousness Without Law

Romans 3:21-26

The Gospel of Christ is not about what man can do for God, but what God has done for man.

LTS: Romans 8:22-39

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, his primary goal was not so much to deliver the saving Gospel of Jesus to sinners, but to the saints; that is, to the believers who gathered for worship in the city of Rome.

As you know, the Gospel invitation itself is very simple: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Even a child can understand such a simple proposition. Nevertheless, Paul knows that behind this simplicity is a beautiful complexity that finds its source in the mind of God.

Paul seems persuaded that helping Christians understand the inner-working of the Gospel will good for us. It will help us understand our world. It will help us understand ourselves. And it will help us grow in the knowledge of God. So, let’s begin with a brief review.

In chapter one, Paul shows his readers that in the eyes of God all humans are in serious trouble. Because of our sinful rebellion against God, we all stand before him justly condemned. To be right with God, a person must be as righteous as God is righteous. There must be no moral defect in heart, word, or deed. Rather, there must be a life of perfect righteousness. But how can sinners ever hope to bridge the gap between themselves and an infinitely righteous God.

I suspect that if you were to go down to Sundance Square this afternoon and asked 100 people how they can be made right with God, the nearly universal opinion would be that a good God rewards good people for doing their best.¹ The problem with that idea becomes apparent as soon as you begin reading the N.T.

You see, as you examine the life and ministry of Jesus, you discover that the people who seemed most righteous were the people that Jesus had the harshest words for. On the other hand, the tax-collectors, prostitutes, and sinners tended to be the objects of His compassion, kindness and mercy. This seems backward to us. Shouldn’t God be more attracted to righteous people than to sinners? If that is really what you believe, then you have a significant flaw in your thinking.

You see, In Romans, Paul teaches us that there is none who are righteous. Every man, woman, and child live before God as sinners by birth and sinners by choice. Moreover, we all tend to believe from the heart that in the end God will say that we are RIGHT with him based on our works – that we fulfilled sufficiently to some standard of moral rectitude that will acquit us at the Judgement. But that way of thinking is shattered when we crash into

Romans 3:19

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

¹ Alister Begg, an audio sermon entitled, *After Darkness, Light*. Available at www.truthforlife.org

What Paul is saying here is that even if you try your best to keep the law God gave to his chosen people, you will never make yourself sufficiently righteous to merit salvation. In the eyes of God, all of us are under sin and we will be judged for our sin if we can't find a way to be made right with God.

The \$100,000 question, then, is How can sinners be made Right with God? Furthermore, How is it Right for God to justify sinners? Paul intends to answer both of these questions in our text for this morning. So, if you have a Bible with you, please Stand and turn to Romans 3, and follow along with me as I read verses 21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ 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.

Verse 21 presents us with a major pivot in Paul's teaching. Previous to verse 21 Paul was establishing that the whole world is under God's condemnation. But now he speaks of the sinner's Justification.

And we should know from the start that the terms Justified and Righteousness are the most important words in this text as we will see along the way.

Now, as I studied this passage over the past few weeks, I discovered that excellent bible scholars have approached this passage in a variety of ways. But along the way as I read the literature and listened to others preach this passage, I discovered a very simple and efficient way to map out this text for today's message. Simply put, I want to offer nine truths about Paul's doctrine of justification.²

For the sake of time, let's jump right in.

#1 Justification is apart from the law.

- A. Paul writes (21), "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law..."
- B. The "righteousness of God" is a key theme in this passage as witnessed by the fact that it's used 4 times in these 6 verses. It's important to note two things here about the righteousness Paul is speaking of.

² Credit to Steve Lawson for the simple, straight-forward approach to this text. I discovered it in his message entitled, *The Heart of the Gospel*. Romans 3:21-26.

- C. First, Righteousness, in this context, can be defined as the justifying activity of God.³ We'll talk about Justification more later. But the term "The Righteousness of God" is first used back in 1:18 where Paul told us that "in the gospel, the righteousness of God is continually being revealed" and it is being revealed for the salvation of sinners.
- D. In previous chapters Paul spoke of the condemning activity of God because of man's unrighteousness. Now that Jesus has died and risen, the justifying righteousness of God has come as the remedy for the threat of condemnation. The righteousness of God comes to satisfy the demands of God's law.
- E. The second thing that we need to know about The Righteousness of God is that it is NOT obtained by Law-keeping. The righteousness of God that sinners so desperately need cannot be earned or purchased by good works or rote obedience to a moral code. Sinners must embrace this righteousness without regard to law-keeping.
- F. Attempting to keep the 10 commandments, for example, will get you nowhere with God. The righteousness you need cannot be obtained by obedience to any moral code. Not even the Law of God.
- G. So, Justification is apart from the law. The 2nd truth about justification is...

#2 Justification is Witnessed by the O.T.

- A. Paul says (21) The righteousness of God has been manifest apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it."
- B. When Paul speaks of the "Law and the prophets" he is using a common term that pointed to the whole of God's written word in the O.T.⁴
- C. You may remember from two Romans sermons ago that we talked about this point. Justification by faith alone is NOT a new teaching. It is found throughout the O.T. For example: Gen. 15:6. This is part of the narrative of Abraham where God comes to Him and promises that he will have a son in his old age. And NOT just a son, but from that son would become a host of people that will outnumber the stars.
- D. Then the text says, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." You see, beloved, Justification by faith is not something Paul made up. It was active all the way back in Genesis.
- E. Consider also Psalm 32 where the Psalmist says, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity." Listen, If the Lord does not count one's iniquity (sin) against him, that means he

³ Douglas Moo. *The Epistle to the Romans: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1996), 222

⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur N.T. Commentaries*. (Chicago, Moody Press, 1991), 203

counts him as righteous even though he still sins. It is the righteousness of God apart from the law.

- F. This week Jason reminded me about the story of Zechariah in Luke 1 where we meet a man and his wife, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And the text describes them in the following way. (Lk. 1:5-6)
- G. there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. Isn't that a beautiful description of these senior saints? And yet, just 6 verses later Zechariah, while serving in the Temple, was visited by an angel who told him that he was going to have a son in his old age.
- H. But Zechariah did not believe it. So, the angel disciplined him by making him unable to speak until the child was born.
- I. I love this story because it reminds me of myself - a man who has been declared righteous by God and yet still sins. As Martin Luther put it, every Christian is *Simil Justus et Pecator* – at the same time justified and sinner. The fact is, none of us is able to keep the whole law of God. We need the righteousness of God to be credited to our account by God Himself. And that brings us to the 3rd truth about the doctrine of Justification..

#3 Justification is Provided by God

- A. Back in v. 21-22 where Paul speaks of the “Righteousness of God” he means that righteous that God imparts.⁵ “Righteousness of God” is a genitive of source. In other words, it is a righteousness that comes from God and is given by God. Only God can provide what He requires because God’s standard is absolute perfection. Isn’t that what Jesus meant when (Matt. 5:46) he declared, “Therefore, you must be perfect even as your heavenly Father is Perfect? No one has the capacity to meet God’s standard. And even if we were to take a fresh start at meeting God’s standard this very day, it’s too late. You have already failed to be perfect. Ask your wife! Ask your kids!
- B. There is no other place to go to obtain perfect righteousness. You can’t get it from your church, or from your priest, or from your own diligent effort. The Righteousness of God can only be received from the hand of God. It is, as Martin Luther described it, “an Alien Righteousness.” It comes to us from outside of us. And that brings us to the 4th truth about Justification.

#4 Justification is Received by Faith

- A. Now we come to v. 22 where we read, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

⁵ MacArthur, 1991, p. 201

- B. The truly amazing part of this text is that it covers every aspect of the doctrine of Justification. There are no wasted words here. And the key words before us now are Through Faith. This tells us how sinners can receive the Righteousness of God.
- C. It's not by being good. It's not by being better than other people. It's not by making extraordinary personal sacrifices for others, or for your church. It's not by doing penance or even doing something ostensibly for the glory of God. You can't earn this.
- D. "God's righteousness only becomes operative in human life 'Through faith in Jesus Christ.'⁶ As far as man is concerned this is the only part that involves him/her. The point of Hebrews 11 is to show us that there has never been a means of salvation other than by faith. This is not a N.T. novelty. All those faithful saints in Hebrews 11 were O.T. saints. And all of them were commended for their faith which is the only means of receiving God's righteousness.
- E. Consider also Rom. 4:5

"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.
- F. The only way to receive the Righteousness of God is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. And faith is only as good as it's object. Many people call themselves a "person of faith." And when I hear that I always want to ask, "What is the object of your faith? And some will say, "Well, I just believe." That's not faith in Christ. That's faith in faith. You would be just well off to have faith in nothing at all. That kind of faith will get you nowhere with God.
- G. This point is repeatedly taught in Romans and throughout the N.T.
 - Rom. 3:22 The righteousness of God through faith.
 - 3:26 God is the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus.
 - 3:28 "We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law.
 - 4:5 But the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.
- H. What is faith? Faith is complete surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is to place all your hope for life and death upon Him. It is to entrust your whole life, body and soul to your faithful Savior. Faith compels one to obey Christ and it causes one to love Christ. For Jesus said (John 8:42) "If God were your Father, you would love Me."
- I. Faith begins with your mind that learns the truth about your condition before God, who Jesus is and what Jesus has done for you. It moves to the will where you commit to following wherever He leads. And it finds expression from the heart in joyful worship and love for Christ.

⁶ Frank Gaebelin, & Dick Polcyn; The Expositors Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible, (Grand Rapids, Mich. Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), 41

J. If you have never come to Him with the empty hand of faith to receive His offer of the Righteousness of God, then I plead with you. Don't you think its time to enter through the narrow gate. It's time to fly to Christ for mercy and forgiveness, and eternal life. Do it now before we finish.

K. This brings us to The 5th truth about justification.

#5 Justification is Necessary for Everyone

In that same verse (3:22–23) we read that the righteousness of God is “for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

- A. It makes no difference whether one is rich or poor. It makes no difference whether one is male or female, young or old, educated or uneducated, Jew or Gentile. Everyone needs this righteousness because everyone has falls short of the glory of God.
- B. Picture yourself on the divine scales. You sit on one side and the glory of God sits on the other. When you compare your righteousness to that of God’s resplendent glory, his majesty, His purity, his transcendent holiness, you realize you’re in a world of hurt! Because if you do not measure up to the glory of God, you are unwelcome in God’s house.
- C. What’s worse, we are all in the same predicament. None of us measure up. We all deserve God’s righteous judgment. Because we have failed to live up to the purpose for which we were created; namely to magnify the glory of God
- D. The righteousness of God is desperately needed by every human being who has ever lived. But it can obtain it only by faith in the Savior.⁷ Justification is necessary for everyone.
- E. Steve Lawson emphasized this fact when he says,
- F. “You will never meet a person the rest of your life who does not need the righteousness of God.
- G. And this brings us to the 6th truth about Justification

#6 Justification is Declared by God

- A. Once again in v. 23 we read that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God
And are Justified etc....
- B. “Justify” is a legal term. It is often called “Forensic justification.” The word “forensic” tells us that has to do with the court of law (think, forensic medicine).

The word Justification means to declare that someone is righteous

- C. The term is used to identify an accused person as “Not guilty,” “Fully acquitted, or Righteous.”
- D. When God justifies someone, it indicates that all the demands of His law are completely fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.⁸
- E. Justification is a positive legal judgment on behalf of the accused. It means that the defendant is acquitted of all charges of wrong-doing. But it’s also more than that.
- F. If all we had was a lack of demerit (lack of sin), we would be a big Zero in the eyes of God. But God not only expunges the entire record of our sin, but also imputes to us positive righteousness – the Righteousness of Christ.
- G. R. C. Sproul cautions us about the idea of thinking of Justification as Pardon. To Pardon means that the accused is really guilty and remains guilty. But as an act of kindness on the part of a president or ruler, he has been released from his imposed sentence. But this is not what happens in Justification.
- H. In justification, all our crimes have been erased from the record. He is perfectly and completely forgiven and set free so that it is as if he had never ever sinned. All our sin is laid on Jesus’ record, and all of His righteousness is credited to us. This is what God does for us. Our Justification is declared by God.
- I. It’s important to know that in the act of justification, we are passive. The accused sinner is passive. God does everything. And that brings us to the seventh truth about Justification is...

#7. Justification is Received as a gift.

In verse 24 we read - “and are justified by his grace as a gift.

- A. Before he met Christ on the Damascus road, Paul had hope that after a lifetime of diligent faithfulness and perseverance in observing the Law, he would one day get to hear God the judge declare him righteous at the final judgment. But (as F.F. Bruce responds), “In this way of righteousness apart from the law, the procedure is reversed: God pronounces believers righteous at the beginning of their course, not at the end of it.” And if he pronounces them righteous at the beginning of their course, it cannot be on the basis of works they have not yet done. True justification, on the contrary, is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he [forgives] all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight.⁹
- B. And in all of this, we are merely the passive recipients of God’s kind and merciful grace. And that leads into the 8th truth about justification...

⁸ MacArthur, 1991, p. 208

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An introduction and commentary*, 2nd ed. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 97

#8 Justification is Purchased by Christ

- A. Verse 24 says, “we are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”
- B. Here is the first time in Romans that the verb to justify is used in a positive context pointing the doctrine of Justification by faith alone.¹⁰
- C. But the point I want to make here is that the reason our Justification comes at no cost to us is NOT because Justification is cheap, but because someone paid the exorbitant price for it on our behalf.
- D. The word Redemption here means to rescue by means of payment of a ransom.¹¹ What is the ransom price required to deliver a sinner from his slavery to sin and its just condemnation? Nothing less than the blood of Christ.
- E. Paul says (v.24) “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.
- F. The word Propitiation means to satisfy. Specifically, it means to satisfy the just demands of God’s law against sinners. And the only acceptable payment would be a sacrifice made by God Himself. For that reason, God the Son left his heavenly throne and offered Himself as a ransom. By his perfect life (his active obedience) he satisfied all the demands of the law. And by His death he appeased the wrath of God who said, “The wages of sin is death.”
- G. The hymn-writer was right when he wrote, “In my place condemned He stood.” All our sin was imputed to Jesus’ account, and all his righteousness was imputed to your account in the eyes of God. Because of this, we are no longer under the law’s condemnation. We are free and righteous in His sight through Christ.
- H. Martin Luther once wrote a letter to a friend who was experiencing significant spiritual distress. His counsel to the man was as follows. He said, “Learn to consider Christ Crucified. Make sure that you keep your gaze on the cross. And learn to sing to Jesus in this way.” Then, this was the song he gave to Him. It goes like this:

“Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness,
I am your sin.
You took on you what was mine.
You set on me what was yours .
You became what you were not,
that I might become what I am not. Amen”

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, 1980, p. 129

¹¹ William Hendriksen, 1980, p. 130

- I. When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, he said it like this.
“God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
- J. Amazingly, as Paul repeats in Rom 3:24, all this can be received NOT by promising God you will do better, or by striving harder to keep the Law, but simply by faith in the perfect life and propitiatory death of Jesus Christ.

And this brings us to 9th truth about Justification

#9 Justification is Granted by a Just God:

- A. At the beginning of this text we asked, “How can God give sinners the righteousness of God? That is, how can he make sinners Right? The first 8 truths explain that. But now the question is asked, how is it RIGHT for God to do this? The answer is in vv 25-26.
- B. Here we read:

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ 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.

- C. The difficulty with God’s plan of salvation was NOT getting sinful man to accept a holy God, but getting Holy God to accept sinful men without violating his own perfect standard of Justice.¹² But by the perfect life and substitutionary death of Christ on our behalf, God showed Himself to be both Just and the Justifier of those who believe.

Do you see now why Luther said that Justification by Faith Alone is the ground upon which Christianity stands or falls?

It is the hinge upon which all of Christianity swings.

J.I. Packer said the doctrine of justification by faith alone is the Atlas that bears the full weight of the gospel and all Christian teaching.

It is a glorious gift to all who will believe it and receive it by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

¹² MacArthur, 1991, p. 219