

Romans: The Good News of God

How to Be Right with God (Part 2)

Romans 3:21b-22a

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Scripture

In his commentary on Romans, John MacArthur notes that centuries ago Job asked the most important question ever asked: “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2b).

Throughout the Bible—and history—many have asked the question: “How can anyone be right in the presence of God?”

The Apostle Paul answers that question in our text for today. Let’s read Romans 3:21-25a:

²¹ 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. (Romans 3:21-25a)

Introduction

Dr. Johnny V. Miller, formerly the President of Columbia International University and currently the Senior Pastor of Calvary Church in Lancaster, PA, said that when he was a teenager, he became fascinated, appalled, and grieved by the Holocaust. One scene that haunted him was a picture from Auschwitz. Above the entryway to the infamous concentration camp were the words, “Arbeit Macht Frei.” (The same words stood above the entryway to the camp at Dachau.)

“Arbeit Macht Frei” means, “Work Makes Free.” What the Germans were communicating to the prisoners is that work will liberate and give freedom.

But it was a lie—a false hope. The Nazis made the people be-

lieve that hard work would equal liberation, but the promised “liberation” was horrifying suffering and even death.

“Arbeit Macht Frei.”

Johnny Miller said the reason that phrase haunted him is because it is the spiritual lie of this age. It is a satanic lie. It is a religious lie. It is a false hope—an impossible dream for many people in the world. People believe that their good works will be great enough to outweigh their bad works, allowing them to stand before God in eternity and say, “You owe me the right to enter into your heaven because of my good works.”

It is the hope of every false religion—Arbeit Macht Frei, Work Makes Free.¹

But it is not my work that makes me free. It is Christ’s work that makes me free.

In our text for today the Apostle Paul answers the question, “But how can a man be in the right before God?” And he makes as clear as he possibly can that it is not our work—our righteousness—that makes us right before God. But rather, it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone that makes us right before God.

In order to help us understand Romans 3:21-25a I am using material from John MacArthur. In Romans 3:21-25a Paul gives us seven elements of the righteousness that God divinely imputes to those who trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. This righteousness is:

1. apart from the law (3:21a),
2. built on revelation (3:21b),
3. received through faith (3:22a),
4. provided for all who believe (3:22b-23),
5. given freely through grace (3:24a),
6. accomplished by redemption (3:24b), and
7. paid for by an atoning sacrifice (3:25a).

Review

Last time we saw the first element of God’s righteousness.

¹ From Johnny V. Miller’s sermon, “The Great Rescue,” PreachingToday.com (4-14-07).

I. Righteousness Is Apart from the Law (3:21a)

First, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a). The Apostle Paul says in Romans 3:21a: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law.**”

Except for the introduction (1:1-18), this letter so far has portrayed an utterly dark picture of our sin and hopelessness apart from God. Now, after backing all sinful mankind, Jew and Greek alike, into the totally dark and seemingly inescapable corner of God’s wrath (1:18-3:20), Paul begins to open the window of divine grace that lets in the glorious light of salvation through the righteousness that God himself has provided.

First of all, Paul says, the righteousness that God imputes to all Christians is **apart from the law**. That is, not one of us can perfectly obey the law of God and therefore meet his perfect standard. And so the righteousness that we need to get in to heaven is something that God himself gives to us. It is in fact the perfect righteousness of Jesus that God credits to us. It is Jesus’ righteousness alone that is acceptable to God.

Lesson

Today, I want to continue with the next two elements that Paul gives in Romans 3:21-25a concerning the righteousness that God divinely grants to those who trust in his Son, Jesus Christ.

II. Righteousness Is Built on Revelation (3:21b)

Second, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is built on revelation (3:21b). Paul says in Romans 3:21: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, **although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.**”

The phrase “**the Law and the Prophets**” was a phrase used to encompass all of God’s written Word, what we now call the Old Testament. In other words, Paul was not speaking about a *new* kind of righteousness but about *God’s* righteousness that is spoken of throughout the Old Testament.

Not only do **the Law and the Prophets** proclaim God’s perfect righteousness, but they affirm what Paul has just stated—that, without exception, we are unable to achieve that righteousness in our strength or power.

The Jews had great reverence for the Old Testament, but most of them failed to realize that, although divinely revealed, those Scriptures in and of themselves had no power to save.

“You search the Scriptures,” Jesus told a group of Jewish people, “because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). In other words, **the Law and the Prophets** did not show them how to achieve their own righteousness but pointed to the coming Messiah, the Savior and Son of God, who himself would *provide* the righteousness that God demands of us all. Although the full revelation of salvation through Jesus Christ was not given in the Old Testament, the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ had *always* been the way of salvation to which the Old Testament pointed.

The Mosaic laws were not given as a means of achieving righteousness but of describing God’s righteousness and showing the impossibility of our living up to it.

Similarly, the Mosaic sacrifices were not prescribed as a means of atoning for sin but of symbolically pointing to Jesus, who himself became the sacrifice for the sins of the elect.

The commandments, rituals, sacrifices, and godly principles taught in the Old Testament were, and in fact still are, part of God’s divinely inspired Word. But they, in and of themselves, could never remove sin, forgive sin, atone for sin, or give a new and righteous life to a sinner—no matter how zealously and sincerely he tried to abide by them.

In the year 2000 our family visited South Africa. While there

our family made a trip from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth, a trip of about 500 miles. My brother lent me a map and several brochures of South Africa, and I studied the map to find the best route to travel from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth. Our family studied the brochures to learn about all the things we could do *en route* to Port Elizabeth.

Now, did studying the map get us from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth? Did studying the brochures help us to enjoy the actual places along the way? No. Of course not. The map and brochures were tools of information telling us how to get from Cape Town to Port Elizabeth and to the various places of interest along the way. We actually had to get in the car and travel along the route in order to reach our destination, Port Elizabeth.

In the same way, the Bible (in one sense) is a tool of information telling us the way to God. By itself, the Bible is unable to save us. But, it is a reliable and truthful guide about how to reach heaven. The Bible, or **the Law and the Prophets** as Paul calls it here, clearly tells us about the righteousness from God that we so clearly need in order to be with God for all eternity. That is why it is so important to study the Bible.

George Mueller once said this about God's word:

The vigor of our spiritual life will be in exact proportion to the place held by the Bible in our life and thoughts. I solemnly state this from the experience of 54 years. The first three years after conversion I neglected the word of God. Since I began to search it diligently the blessing has been wonderful. Great has been the blessing from consecutive, diligent, daily study. I look upon it as a lost day when I have not had a good time over the word of God.

Study the Bible, not as an end in itself but rather as a means to an end, and that is to know God and the righteousness that he has provided in Jesus Christ.

The righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), and built on revelation (3:21b).

III. Righteousness Is Received through Faith (3:22a)

Third, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is received through faith (3:22a). We read in Romans 3:22a: “**the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. . .**”

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, Paul mentions again that he is speaking of the perfect **righteousness of God**, not the imperfect righteousness of human achievement.

Paul’s point here is that the perfect, saving **righteousness of God**, not only is received apart from the law and built on revelation, but also is received *only* through **faith**. That has always been the only way of salvation as far as our part is concerned. The very point of Hebrews 11 is to show that there has *never* been a means of salvation other than through **faith** in the true God.

That is also a repeated theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 4:5 he says, “And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

And in Romans 4:13 he says, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (cf. 4:20).

Paul begins Romans 5 by declaring that “therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1).

There is, of course, such a thing as false faith, even in the name of Christ. The Apostle John reports that many people who had a superficial faith in Jesus did not have saving faith. To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples” (John 8:31).

In other words, obedience to his Word is evidence of true faith, whereas continual disobedience is evidence of false faith. “So also,” James said, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17).

In other words, disobedient faith is spurious faith. It is “by it-

self,” that is, unrelated to faith in God. False faith may be faith in good works, faith in ritual, faith in a religious experience or system, faith in one’s own goodness, or simply a nebulous faith in faith that is so common in our day.

We are saved **through faith in Jesus Christ** alone, apart from anything else. But Scripture makes clear that saving faith is immeasurably more than simply making a verbal declaration of believing about Jesus. It results in obeying Jesus.

Norene Craig of Tucson, Arizona sent this story in to *Christian Reader*:

Joe, our nearly-4-year-old, was well-behaved except for one habit—he didn’t like to wear shoes. When it was time for his first Vacation Bible School, we told Joe he must keep his shoes on at all times at the church. He nodded in agreement, but I worried about his ability to resist temptation.

My fears were set to rest on parents’ night. On display were the crafts the children had completed during the week. Hanging up for all to see were eleven plaster plaques of children’s feet, and one plaque of our little Joe’s hands.

Saving **faith in Jesus Christ** is a little bit like that. When we trust Jesus, our greatest desire is to obey him and serve him.

The late pastor and author A. W. Tozer perceptively commented:

Something has happened to the doctrine of justification. . . . The faith of Paul and Luther was a revolutionizing thing. It upset the whole life of the individual and made him into another person altogether. It laid hold on the life and brought it unto obedience to Christ. It took up its cross and followed along after Jesus with no intention of going back. It said good-bye to its old friends as certainly as Elijah when he stepped into the fiery chariot and went away in the whirlwind. It had a finality about it. It snapped shut on a man’s heart like a trap; it captured the man and made him from that moment forward a happy love-servant of his Lord.²

² A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1955), 45-46.

This saving **faith in Jesus Christ** that the New Testament teaches is much more than a simple affirmation of certain truths about him. Even the demons acknowledged many facts about him. One of the demons who possessed the man from Gadara shouted at the top of his voice to Jesus, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” (Mark 5:7).

The demon who gave the slave girl the power of divination described Paul and his friends as “servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17).

Saving faith is a placing of oneself totally in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, and it has certain indispensable elements that the New Testament clearly teaches.

First, saving **faith in Jesus Christ** involves the *intellect*. No one can think his way into heaven, but neither can he receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior without some comprehension of the truth of the gospel (cf. Romans 10:17ff).

Second, saving **faith in Jesus Christ** also involves the *emotions*. Paul told the Roman Christians, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6:17). Saving **faith** must come from the heart as well as from the mind. A person cannot be saved by good feelings about Christ, and many people throughout the ages and in our own day have substituted good feelings about Christ for saving faith in him. But on the other hand, a person whose life is transformed by Christ will be affected in his emotions in the deepest possible way.

And third, saving **faith in Jesus Christ** also involves the exercise of the *will*. This is so, because, as in the verse just mentioned (Romans 6:17), salvation begins (from the human standpoint) with a person’s willful obedience in turning from sin to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of God’s righteousness, and it is because of that truth that he can impute divine righteousness to those who trust him. During his earthly incarnation, Jesus

demonstrated God's righteousness by living a sinless life. In his death Christ also demonstrated God's righteousness by paying the penalty for the unrighteous lives of sinners such as ourselves.

The English Puritan Joseph Alleine wrote:

All of Christ is accepted by the sincere convert; he loves not only the wages, but the work of Christ; not only the benefits, but the burden of Christ; he is willing not only to tread out the corn, but to draw under the yoke; he takes up the command of Christ, yea, the cross of Christ.

The unsound closeth by halves with Christ: he is all for the salvation of Christ, but he is not for sanctification; he is for the privileges, but appropriates not the person of Christ; he divides the offices and benefits of Christ. This is an error in the foundation. Whoso loveth life, let him beware here; it is an undoing mistake, of which you have been often warned, and yet none is more common.

Jesus is a sweet name, but men "love not the Lord Jesus in sincerity." They will not have him as God offers, "to be a Prince and a Savior." They divide what God has joined, the king and the priest; yea, they will not accept the salvation of Christ as he intends it; they divide it here.

Every man's vote is for salvation from suffering; but they desire not to be saved from sinning; they would have their lives saved, but withal would have their lusts. Yea, many divide here again; they would be content to have some of their sins destroyed, but they cannot leave the lap of Delilah, or divorce the beloved Herodius; they cannot be cruel to the right eye or right hand; the Lord must pardon them in this thing. O be carefully scrupulous here; your soul depends on it.

The sound convert takes a whole Christ, and takes him for all intents and purposes, without exceptions, without limitations, without reserve. He is willing to have Christ upon any terms; he is willing to have the dominion of Christ, as well as deliverance by Christ; he saith, with Paul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Any thing, Lord. He sends the blank to Christ to set down his own conditions.³

³ Joseph Alleine, *The Alarm to Unconverted Sinners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980 reprint), 46-48.

The righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), and received through faith (3:22a).

Conclusion

I am so thankful that God has provided his righteousness for me, aren't you?

In 1834 Edward Mote wrote a hymn titled "The Immutable Basis of a Sinner's Hope." It was designed as a series of couplets to show that our hope is based on the unchangeable grace of almighty God. Listen to two verses that talk about our right standing before God which is based on Jesus' righteousness. I pray that you will be able to affirm what Mote has written in the hymn we know as "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less":

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.

When he shall come with trumpet sound,
O may I then in him be found;
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

May the Lord help each one of us to trust in the righteousness of God alone, which is apart from the law, built on revelation, and received by faith. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, several thousand years ago Job asked, “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2).

We attempt to answer that question by referring to our effort, our work, our obedience, or our righteousness.

How we thank you for the good news of God. We thank you for the righteousness of God which has been manifested apart from the law, built on revelation, and received by faith. We thank you that you have provided a perfect righteousness in your Son, Jesus Christ.

O Lord our God, clothe us with the righteousness of Christ so that we can be in the right before you on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ rather than the imperfect and inadequate righteousness of ourselves.

And all of this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.