



The Righteousness of God

Romans 3:21-26

- 1. Comes Not from the Law (verse 21)**
- 2. Comes Through Faith (verses 22-23)**
- 3. Comes By Grace (verse 24)**
- 4. Comes By Propitiation (verses 25-26)**

We come this morning to a very important passage of Scripture. In fact, it has been called the acropolis of the Christian faith. That is, the peak! The most prominent thing in all of the Bible. Luther called this the chief point and the central place of the epistle and of the whole Bible. William Cowper, famous hymn-writer, was converted through these words. John Piper wrote, "If I were asked, 'What is the most important paragraph in the Bible?' I think this (Rom. 3:23-26) is the paragraph I would name. It goes to the very root of the Christian gospel and lays bare the heart of God like few other texts." (John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*, p. 165).

The reason why it is so important is because it explains forgiveness. It explains how God can be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

I remember having a Coke in a McDonalds with a non-Christian, who had happened to attend our church and was seemingly interested in the things of Christianity. I remember prodding him with a few questions to see what he thought about God and about Christ and about his own salvation, so that I might be able to help him understand the truth about Jesus Christ. I remember him making an astonishing statement, which I have continued to remember until this day. In talking about forgiveness, he said, "Of course God will forgive me. He made me, didn't He?"

The picture that this man had in his mind when he thought about God was that God was the Creator, who created us. Seemingly, by way of obligation to us, somehow, God would, of course, forgive those He made. God made us. He loves us. He will demonstrate His love to us by forgiving us and not holding our sins against us. This young man failed to realize one thing: God is a just God. He failed to realize that God is a judge, who always judges fairly. And he cannot allow any sin to go unpunished!

A police officer might be lenient to you and give you a warning rather than a ticket. But God won't be so lenient. An earthly judge might receive a plea-bargain, (an admission of guilt in exchange for a lesser sentence so as not to prolong a trial). But God doesn't receive plea bargains.

God adheres strictly to His law. He will take no bribes. He won't bend. He won't move from His law. God will punish every sin ever committed.

God cannot simply "overlook" sin, like this man I was telling you about thought. God cannot simply "forgive" sin without punishing sin. His justice won't allow it.

We are good at overlooking sin. Because that's how we forgive. We simply let the transgression pass. The Proverbs speak of that as a good thing. Proverbs 19:11 says, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense"

But that is something that God can never do. He can never overlook an offense. To do so means that he is not just.

So, how exactly does God forgive? Let's look at our text for today: Romans 3:21-26.

Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

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.

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 begins with the word, "But." This is one of those "Blessed 'Buts" in the Scripture. It's one of those large contrasts that bring the great blessing of God. "You were dead in your transgressions and sins. We also lived in the passions of our flesh! We all were by nature children of wrath!" (Ephesians 2:1-3). Then, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ!" (Ephesians 2:4-6).

Or in Titus 3, where we read, "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." (Titus 3:3). And then, "But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." (Titus 3:4-5).

And in our text, we have another "blessed 'but'!" And the set-up to the "but" isn't merely a verse (or two or three or five). The set-up begins back in chapter 1 and verse 18, which reads thus: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." And Paul continues on for two entire chapters, totaling 64 verses, until he hits the "but" in chapter 3 and verse 21.

The contrast could hardly be bigger. It's as big as the contrast is between the "bad news" and the "good news." The bad news is that we are all sinners. Whether the Gentile (Romans, chapter 1) or the Jew (Romans, chapter 2), we are all "under sin" (Romans 3:9). Romans 3:10, "None is righteous, no, not one!" And for two chapters, Paul has been hammering this point home. And since October, at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been thinking about our sin!

But that all changes today. For, today we begin to examine our salvation. This is the next major section of Romans (Sin, Salvation, Sanctification, Security, Sovereignty, Service). And as we begin looking into our salvation, Paul first dives into "The Righteousness of God."

Indeed, this is the title of my message this morning. And rightly so, because Paul speaks of God's righteousness four times in our text.

I want to read it again, pointing out the number of times that Paul addresses the "righteousness" of God. Look again at Romans 3:21-26

Romans 3:21-26

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. 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.

But that's not the only time that "Righteousness" is used in this passage. The word translated, "Just" is the same Greek word. And so, we can add three more times that Paul speaks of "righteousness." Verse 24, "and are justified" (i.e. "Made Righteous"); Verse 26, "that he might be just..." (i.e. "Righteous") "...and the justifier" (i.e. "The One making righteous").

This passage is all about the righteousness of God. It's all about how God makes us righteous. Let's dig into my outline this morning.

My first point this morning is this: The Righteousness of God ...

1. Comes Not from the Law (verse 21)

That's what we read in verse 21,

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—

In the previous verse (verse 20), Paul had just declared that "by the works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight." That is, by the works of the law, no human being will be made righteous in God's sight. In other words, you don't obtain righteousness through obedience to the law! You don't obtain righteousness through any obedience to God!

It comes a different way. In verse 20, we read that "through the law comes knowledge of sin." And there's the crack that opens the door. The laws of the Old Testament are not intended to bring us to righteousness. Rather, they are to bring us to despair! And as we are in despair of our sin, we seek a Savior! Indeed, the Old Testament speaks of a Savior. It speaks of a Messiah that is to come.

Moses promised that another prophet would arise to lead the people of God with the words of God (Deuteronomy 18:15-18). The prophets spoke of one who would come and bear our sin upon his shoulders. "But he was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, And with his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Such was the testimony of the law and the prophets. They testified to the way of righteousness; not through themselves, but through One who is to come! Here's an illustration. Let's think of travel. Apart from Christ, we had only one road that led us to God. It was called the road of law-keeping. Now, unfortunately, this road, although it heads toward God, is difficult to travel. In fact, it's impossible to travel. The road goes straight up a mountain, with no switchbacks.

God is on the other side of the mountain. And we need to get up and over the mountain to get to him. But, the mountain called Sinai is too steep for us to pass. It merely leads us to a place where we come to know our sin and realize that there's no way that we can get to God on this road.

In our despair, we look behind us, and we see Jesus with his drilling equipment and his paving equipment coming up the road. Rather than going straight up the hill, Jesus begins digging right into the base of the mountain. Jesus digs a tunnel for us to travel through, and paves the road to make it smooth. It leads us to the same place (the other side of the mountain--where God is). But, it takes us along a different path. By the path of the "works of the law," (up and over the mountain) we will never be able to go. But, by the tunnel of the "righteousness of God through faith," we can arrive at God.

And that's the point of verses 22-23. The Righteousness of God Comes Not from the Law (verse 21). Instead, The Righteousness of God, ...

2. Comes Through Faith (verses 22-23)

Let's read verses 22 and 23.

Romans 3:22-23

the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

This here is the gospel! This is the gospel, that we can attain to the righteousness of God, simply by believing in Jesus Christ. What an amazing thing it is that we, sinners though we be, can be made righteous through faith in Jesus Christ.

It matters not whether you are a Jew (who had the covenant promises of God), or a Gentile (who were strangers to the covenant), or whether you were raised in the church (knowing the Bible stories from your youth), or raised in ignorance of Jesus. It matters not, for all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In other words, we all have failed to reach the 100 percent mark that God demands of all of his creatures.

But what the Law could not do, weakened by the flesh, God has done by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to condemn sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). And all we need to do is believe! We simply need to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. And trust in his righteousness and not in our own! And that's how we are saved from our sin.

This is where Paul has been heading ever since chapter 1. Look back at Romans 1:16, ...

Romans 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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Do you believe in Jesus Christ? He is your only hope! He is your only hope for forgiveness of sins. He is your only hope for keeping you until that final day.

Now, at this point, you need to be careful! See, I'm not asking you if you profess to believe. I'm asking you if you really believe in Jesus.

I say this because there are many in this world who are deceived. They know enough that salvation comes through Jesus. Yet, they know little of what a life of faith looks like.

This week I had an opportunity to visit a man who is facing some great difficulties in his life. In fact, that is the reason he invited me into his home. I asked him if he was a Christian. He said, "Yes." I asked him if he went to church anywhere. He said, "I used to go." As I dug further, he meant that he hadn't been to church in a decade.

I asked him if he had a Bible. He said, "I think so." As I dug further, he meant that he thinks his Bible is somewhere deep in his closet someplace. He told me that he thinks that he could find it.

Then, I quoted to him from the mouth of Jesus, "You will know them by their fruits. A good tree bears good fruit. A bad tree bears bad fruit." And I asked him what sort of fruit he had in his life. In other words, I asked him how his life was demonstrating a life of faith. This is the point of Romans 1:17, "The righteous will live by faith." And so I was inquiring how his faith was shown in his life.

Now, I don't know much about his life. But I know enough that his fruit is NOT good. And I told him, "May I suggest that you may not be a Christian?"

Then, I showed him Matthew 7, where many who profess to be Christians will be denied entry into the kingdom of God. And then, I took him to Ephesians 2, explaining that we are dead in our sins and need God to make us alive. And he does this through faith in Jesus.

I pressed him to believe, and have been praying for him daily, believing that the gospel I preached to him over his dining room table is powerful to bring him to salvation if he believes. Salvation, which Comes Through Faith (verses 22-23). Let's move on to our third point this morning. The Righteousness of God ...

3. Comes By Grace (verse 24)

Look at verse 24, ...

Romans 3:24

and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

This is the great reality of our salvation—that it comes by grace; that it comes to us "as a gift." We haven't earned it in any way, shape, or form. God, has simply given it to us.

Next week, God willing, we are going to begin in verse 27, "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded." That's the meaning of grace. Grace is one-sided. It comes to us, not because we have earned it, but because we are objects of God's divine favor.

This will be Paul's point in chapter 4.

Romans 4:4-5

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

That's how our salvation comes to us, not because we have worked for it, but because God has graciously chosen to give it to us. Verse 24 doesn't say, "[we] are justified by works as what is due to us." No, ...

Romans 3:24

[we] are justified by his grace as a gift, ...

Grace means "All of God! And none of us." God hasn't "transformed" us to be acceptable in his sight. He has "redeemed" us to be brought into his presence.

Romans 3:24

... and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Sin demanded a price to be paid. And Christ Jesus paid that ransom upon the cross to set us free.

Our next point shows exactly how that redemption was accomplished. And this is where the importance of this paragraph in the Bible comes into play. The Righteousness of God, ...

4. Comes By Propitiation (verses 25-26)

Romans 3:25-26

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. 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.

You see the word, "Propitiation" come right there in verse 25. And when you hear this word, you should immediately think of another word: "wrath." Because, that's what propitiation is talking about. It's talking about wrath. It's talking about anger. Propitiation simply means "satisfying God's wrath." God's wrath and anger and justice is upon the sin of the world. That's been the whole point of Romans thus far. Yet, Jesus Christ satisfied that wrath in His blood. Jesus died as a wrath-bearing substitute. Thereby redeeming us from our sin (verse 24).

Let's take an example of what we are talking about. You are cruising down the highway a bit faster than you should be driving. And you see, in your rearview mirror, a policeman. You pull over to the side of the road. The policeman approaches your car and tells you that you were speeding. If the policeman is perfectly just, he will not give you a warning. He will strictly enforce the laws and give you a ticket.

At that point, there is tension between you and the state. You committed a crime. You have to pay the consequences. The consequence (in this case) is a sum of money. But when you pay that money, the state is satisfied. Their wrath has been abated. The slate has been propitiated.

That's what Jesus did upon the cross. The consequence of our sin is God's anger and hell. But, Jesus paid the price of our sin so that God is no longer angry with us! Instead, he is happy with us!

Do you see how central the cross of Christ is? God poured out his wrath upon Jesus as payment for our sin.

OK, so let's think about another situation. Let's think about King David. How did God forgive his sin? Did God just look past his sin? But God cannot do that. He can't "forgive" sin without punishing sin, because that would be unjust.

Or what about the sin of Abraham or Jacob or Moses? How did God forgive those sins? Did he simply "overlook" them? Verse 25 answers that question.

Romans 3:25

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.

Yes, God "passed over former sins." Yes, God passed over Abraham's lying. Yes, God passed over Jacob's deceitful ways. Yes, God passed over Moses' murder of the Egyptian. Yes, God passed over Aaron and Miriam's murmuring. Yes, God passed over the adultery of David. Yes, God passed over the myriads of sins of the Old Testament saints. But, that brought incredible tension into the world. Because, it couldn't stay that way! The justice of God is at stake! But he did in his patience.

With the coming of Jesus, he settled his accounts. In other words, Jesus paid for the sins of Abraham and Jacob and Moses and David in the death of Jesus.

Romans 3:26

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.

Because of the sacrifice of Jesus, God can be perfectly just. Jesus took the punishment that our sins deserved. The price of our sin was paid! And, because of the sacrifice of Jesus, God can be the justifier (the one who makes righteous).

Today, we look back upon the sacrifice. But the Old Testament saints looked forward to the day when God would make good on his accounts.

Another good illustration might be this: A credit card. When you go to the store, and you pay with a credit card, you have not paid for your item. You have promised to pay later for your item. And that's what took place with Old Testament saints. When God passed over their sins, they weren't forgotten or forgiven. They were placed on God's credit card. Paid in full at the death of Christ.

I hope that you see how important this is! It means that Christianity is the only world religion that makes a way for God to be just and the justifier.

Do you know that there are many in our land today who hope and trust in God to forgive without punishment. Do you realize that the hope of the Muslim world is that God will not be just? The Koran says that in the day of judgment, "as for him whose good deeds are preponderant [i.e. heavy], these are the successful [i.e. happy]. And as for him whose good deeds are light, these are they who shall have lost their souls, abiding in hell." [\[1\]](#)

In other words, the Muslim believes that he will stand before God, the Judge and God will weigh the good and the bad. If the good outweigh the bad, He forgives. If the bad outweigh the good, He condemns. The Muslim believes that Allah will be merciful and will overlook sin.

The Jewish person is the same. The hope of the Jewish world is that God will not be just? God established sacrifices for Israel to perform. These sacrifices were meant to teach Israel that "without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). But ever since the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Jews haven't performed any sacrifices. God told them to sacrifice for their forgiveness, but they have stopped sacrificing.

A big dilemma arose with the Jews shortly after the temple was destroyed. Strong Jewish tradition tells the story of a Jewish student, who grieved over the fact that Israel could no longer offer up her sacrifices, because the temple was destroyed. A certain Rabbi Johanan sought to console this grieving Jewish student, "My son, do not weep. We have a means of atonement as effective as this (i.e. the temple ritual and sacrifice). And what is it? It is deeds of living-kindness. As the prophet has said, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' " (Hoe. 6:6; Hebrews 10:1-2).

I remember a Jewish friend who asked her mother why we don't sacrifice today. She said, "Our confession of sins on the Day of Atonement is enough to forgive sins."

The Jew today is relying upon his own good deeds to stand before God, in hopes that God will forgive. The Jews today transgress the law they hold so dear, which taught that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. In other words, the Jews are hoping that God will not be just!

So, how is it that God can be just and also forgive sin? In His patience, God "overlooked" the sins previously committed, because He knew of one who was coming, who would allow God to forgive sin. God demonstrated His righteousness (i.e. His justice) in Jesus Christ in that He punished Him in the place of all those whom He would forgive. So, God is just in that He punished Jesus. And, God is justifier in that He declares the sinner forgiven. As Paul says, "that He might be just and the justifier"

This is how God can be just and also forgive sin: in Jesus Christ, God has punished sin. This becomes ours "by faith in Jesus." It will come no other way -- only through trusting the blood of Jesus Christ as your substitute, who alone can turn away the wrath of God (verse 25). God can't overlook sin. God must punish sin.

Here is the question, "how will God punish your sin?" Will He punish you in hell forever? Has He punished Jesus Christ in your place in the cross 2000 years ago?

This is the meaning behind the Lord's Supper. The ransom has been paid and the substitution has been made. We glory that in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 29, 2017 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Sura 23:102-3.