

MAN'S GREATEST NEED: THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Series: Righteousness Revealed

Romans 3:21-31

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Imagine with me that you are standing on the wing of an airplane. The airplane is going crash and you must jump. You have two options to save yourself: You can flap your arms really hard and try to fly, or, you can trust the parachute provided for you. What are you going to choose? Everyone in their right mind would go with the parachute provided them. We know we can't save ourselves. Why then, when it comes to salvation, do we try to save ourselves through our own righteousness rather than trust the perfect righteousness provided in Christ? That's our subject today.

In Romans 1:18-3:20—the better part of three chapters—Paul has proven that there is *none* righteous (3:10-18). All of us are *unrighteous* sinners and there's nothing we can do, being under the power of sin, to save ourselves. However, the good news of the gospel (gospel means good news) is that God has provided for us *His righteousness* in Christ. He provided a perfect parachute for us. Romans 1:16-17, the theme verse of Romans, says, “*It [the gospel] is the power of salvation unto everyone who believes*” because “*in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed.*” Paul explains what he means by that in detail in our passage today. He explains the gospel. It is an honor to preach this text. It's the heart of Romans and some think of the entire Bible on the subject of salvation. It's a passage the world desperately needs to hear.

I. THE MANIFESTATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. (3:21-22)

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

Those words “**But now**” (v. 21) are often Paul's way of moving from a dark and gloomy picture to something wonderful God does for us.¹ We've spent the greater part of 3 chapters looking at the bad news, *but now* we turn to the good news! We are unrighteous, *but now* we see God's righteousness provided for us in the gospel.

What is “**the righteousness of God**” exactly? At least one time the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Romans is a reference to the attribute of God's justice—the righteous character of God (3:5). God is righteous and that's referenced at times (3:25, 26; nuanced 9:14). His “righteousness” is sometimes seen in His saving activity. In the Old Testament (OT), especially Psalms and Isaiah, God's righteousness is the basis of His saving activity. In His righteousness, He saves men. Romans 5:18 calls Jesus' sacrifice on the cross an “*act of righteousness.*” So righteousness can refer to God's character or actions. But this phrase “*the righteousness of God*” is a crucial, gospel-defining phrase. If we're going to understand the gospel, we need to get a handle on it. And we need to see it not as an attribute or activity of God, but as a reference to the *status* God gives to

sinners who *have faith in* Christ as their Savior from sin. They are *given* “the righteousness of God.”

“The righteousness of God” = a status given as a free gift to sinners upon faith in Christ.

So the “*of God*” in “*the righteousness of God*” is reflecting the *origin* of that status of righteousness. Those who have faith in Christ are given *His* righteousness, as opposed to their *own* righteousness. We are *unrighteous* sinners, but God is *righteous*. Therefore, in order for a sinful man to be saved and dwell in God’s presence eternally (Psalm 5:4), we need His righteousness credited to our account. We need a righteousness *from God* or *of God*. It’s a forensic, judicial status. Romans 5:17 calls it the “*gift of righteousness*” because God gives His righteousness to those who trust in/believe in/have faith in Christ. It’s in the gospel that “*the righteousness of God has been revealed,*” (1:17; **manifested**, made known), “*even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*” **Faith in Christ** is the *vehicle* or the *means* (Gk., *dia*, through; not the *merit*) through which the righteousness of God comes to you or becomes your possession.

Man’s greatest need is the righteousness of God.

This is man’s greatest need. Our greatest need is not money. It’s not a home. It’s not stuff. It’s not health. It’s not a long life. It’s the righteousness of God. We aren’t getting into heaven without it. But what Paul has explained in Romans 2-3 is that a lot of people try to get to heaven with their own righteousness. They try to produce their own righteousness through the keeping of the Mosaic Law or religious rituals or the keeping of moral codes or keeping up with their conscience. But as Paul has says, if you’re looking for this righteousness of God, don’t look to the Law. This righteousness is given **apart from the Law**. You must look to Christ.

Actually, in the Greek, there is no definite article “the” before the word “law” in verse 21 like you see in many translations. This is why you must pay close attention in Romans to Paul’s use of the word *law*. It’s not always a reference to the Mosaic Law with a capital L. And since they wrote in all caps (uncial) we must discern what he meant by the grammar and context. While it very well could refer to “the Law” based on the context (vv. 19-20), I think his use of the word *law* here (as at other times) is more like a governing principle. Paul is *excluding any law in general*—any type of “law”—be it the Mosaic Law or the laws of legalists and moralists who say things like, “If you want to go to heaven, you need to this or that” rather than put your faith in Christ. We are not saved by a principle of law but of grace.

The reason why is because God cannot accept anything less than absolute perfect righteousness. Being perfectly holy, he must judge sin, and we’ve all sinned. It doesn’t matter how much you flap your arms, your righteousness earned through good works or religious works won’t fly before God. It’s never enough. We must put our trust/faith in the perfect parachute of Christ that He has provided for us or we won’t be saved. Like Paul, in Philippians 3:9, we must be found in Christ, “*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*” (see also Romans 10:3-6).

I cannot stress the importance of understanding this. If you understand this, you understand the gospel. The Reformer Martin Luther said heaven opened up to him when he understood the righteousness of God as a gift and not to His retributive justice. The gospel was revealed to him through a study of Romans.

In second half of verse 21 Paul says this righteousness—which is so foreign to the self-righteous—was **witnessed by the Law and Prophets**. That's a reference to the OT. The OT was mostly comprised of 2 major sections: the Law and the Prophets. So what Paul is saying is that this "righteousness" through faith (and not works of law) is nothing new. It didn't come from left field, unforeseen. It's something the OT taught, and Paul will spend chapter 4 reasoning from the OT that Abraham was justified/considered righteous by faith before the Law was ever given. No one has ever been saved by anything but faith. So let's start looking at why we must trust Christ.

II. THE PROVISION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. (3:22e-24)

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

Paul reminds us that everyone needs God's provision. Paul says there's **no distinction. All have sinned, Jew or Gentile. All fall short of the glory of God**. Not a single person other than Christ has met ever God's standards perfectly. **Falling short** is a really good way to describe sin. It conveys the idea of climbing to an unreachable height.² We can all *try* to climb to the moon. Some might climb a tree trying to touch the moon. Some might climb a mountain. Some might climb a skyscraper. Some might get closer than others, but all fall terribly short. None of us even come close. We lack the ability in and of ourselves to achieve it. So it is with righteousness. Some of us might be more righteous than others but we're all Lawbreakers. None of us can abide with God who is perfect in glory. Psalm 5:4 says, *"For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with You."* That's the bad news. The good news is we all qualify to receive a **gift**:

Verse 24: *"being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; 25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith."*

"Justified" means to be declared righteous; to acquit of guilt an unrighteous party.

So Paul now brings up **justification**. To be justified is to be *declared righteous*. Righteousness and justification are two sides of the same coin, even coming from the same root word in Greek (*dik-*).³ So it's natural for him to continue his discussion of righteousness by talking about justification. And we're going to have to define some big words today. Paul's going to use a lot of big words in his explanation of the gospel, not to confuse us, but to help us understand it. He wants unbelievers to know exactly what the gospel is and for believers to be grounded in it (1:11, 15) so he uses big words. He wants to be precise about it. I'm convinced that sometimes the reason people don't come to Christ is not that they haven't heard, it's that they don't have the gospel explained sufficiently in detail like this. Sometimes believers may even stray into a cult because they aren't grounded in the gospel.

Justification is “the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross.”⁴ That’s verse 24 in a nutshell. Memorize the fact that it’s a declarative *act* and not a *process*. Roman Catholicism teaches that justification is a process. They confuse justification with sanctification. Sanctification is the *process* whereby God makes the believer more and more like Christ in righteous character. Justification is when a sinner trusts Christ and God *declares* a man righteous, indwelling him with the Spirit and sealing him forever from that moment as a child of God. Sanctification is a *process* that may change from day to day, involving the *practice* of our faith. Justification is a *declaration* that will never be repealed, involving our *position*, whereby God declares the believing sinner righteous in Christ.

The righteousness of God is a gift.

Catholicism teaches that grace is something you can earn through good deeds and religious works. The Bible, however, teaches the exact opposite: that **grace** by definition (Rom. 11:6) cannot be earned and therefore this r’ness is a **gift**. A gift is not something you pay for or work for. It has zero cost to you. It’s something you receive by faith. Paul *contrasts* faith with work because faith is not working for salvation, it is resting in what Jesus did. It is receiving freely the gift of eternal life God has extended to us as opposed to earning it as a wage. Faith has been described as the hand of the heart; it doesn’t work to earn salvation, but only accepts a gift that someone else provides. Redemption is another word that demolishes the idea that grace could be earned.

“Redemption” means to purchase out of or buy back.

It was applied to the money that a slave would pay to secure his or her freedom. It’s a price paid for release. In Christ, God paid the price to secure our release from bondage to sin and Law. He can now offer it to us as a gift because *He paid it all*. Where was this price paid? On the cross. Verse 25, “*whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*” Propitiation is another term that demolishes the idea that we could work for grace.

“Propitiation” means to satisfy one’s wrath and cover (atone) it.

You might say I propitiated my wife’s wrath by taking her out to dinner. I satisfied it. Even the Greeks used the word in reference to sacrifices made to gods. Paul is saying that Jesus Christ’s sacrifice propitiates/satisfies God’s wrath against us. But more interesting, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT), this word was used for the mercy seat cover on the ark on which blood was sprinkled once per year to atone/cover the sins of the people. This was one of the crowing moments on the Jewish calendar called the Day of Atonement. In a public spectacle at the Temple compound, the high priest would sacrifice a bull for himself (Lev. 16:3) and then two he-goats and a ram for the people as a burnt offering (Lev. 16:5).⁵ Paul is referencing that. It’s graphic picture of the **public blood-sacrifice** and **substitute** that Jesus Christ was as He was hung up on a cross. He satisfied God’s wrath as our sinless substitute. But as verse 25 reveals, this wasn’t only to grant us His righteousness, it was to demonstrate God’s righteous character as well. There is a way in which the attribute of God’s righteous character is revealed in the gospel.

25... This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; 26 for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Suffice it to say that by Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross, every man knows that God is perfectly righteous because He wouldn't and won't accept anything less. His perfectly righteous standard has been **manifested**. If there was any other way, Jesus didn't need to come and die. But He did, and faith in Him is the only way. He won't accept our self-righteous efforts. He won't even ultimately accept all those sacrifices offered in the OT. Those sacrifices were, I like to think based on this verse, put on a credit card that covered sin temporarily until Christ could come and paid them off in full. Until then, God showed **forbearance**, passing over those **sins previously committed** until just the right time when Christ died for us (Gal. 4:4). He can now be **just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus**. He doesn't have to compromise His character in releasing men from sin. He can now remain perfectly just and justify a sinner whose sins He paid for. Look at it like a speeding ticket. You go to court; the judge declares you guilty; but then that same judge pays the fine for you and you go free. He didn't bend the law. He stayed just. He just took your place and paid the fine for you so you could go free. That's what Christ did for us.

III. THE RESULTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. (3:27-31)

Paul draws 3 implications from the truth that people are justified by grace through faith in Christ:

1. No men can boast.

27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Since justification is by faith in what Christ did for us, no men can **boast**. No one in heaven is ever going to say that they made it to heaven by their own efforts, be it religious works or law-keeping, good deeds or good behavior. You cannot be saved by that sort of "law." God won't allow you to boast. You cannot be justified any way other than through faith in Christ. We are saved by a "**law of faith**" in Christ, not a "law of works." We boast in what He did for us forever.

2. All men have equal access.

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Unlike the Gentiles with their many gods (polytheists), the Jews were monotheists. They believed in one God, and rightly so. But if as many of the Jews were claiming, that you could only be saved by keeping the Law, then what about the Gentiles who never had the Law? If the Law is essential to justification, as they argued, God would have restricted Himself to being only the God of the Jews since they were the only ones entrusted with it (9:4). But God is the God of all and therefore,

justification must be by faith and not by works of the Law. After hearing what Paul said, someone might say, “You’re breaking the Law and making the Law useless!” So Paul asks,

31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

3. Men with faith in Christ establish the Law. (v. 31)

Those who have faith in Christ are not **nullifying** the Law. *Me genoito! May it never be!* Instead, they **establish** it. They uphold it. This is because the Law, as Paul mentioned in Romans 3:20, was never meant to save anyone. He says **we maintain** no one [ever has been or] will be justified by keeping the Law (3:28). Romans 3:20, “*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*” The Law’s purpose was to reveal the holy character of God and to reveal sinful character of man so that we would look to Christ and be saved (Gal. 3:24). We see who God is, then who we are, and we look to Jesus to save us. It was to convict people of their inability to gain acceptance with God by their own works.

The Law is like an x-ray machine: it can reveal the problem of your sinful heart, but it can’t fix you. You must come by faith to the heart Doctor who through the Spirit will give you a new heart. When we look at the Law and see that we are *not righteous*—that we have lied; we have murdered through our hatred; we have committed adultery through lusting; we have coveted; we have not loved God, but have loved all kinds of idols—and then turn to Christ as our Savior from those sins, the Law has done what God designed it to do. We establish it and say it is good. It is holy. We also say, “I am not. I am not righteous. I need Christ and His righteousness.” It’s those who trust 100% completely in Christ (throwing themselves on the mercy of God in Christ) and put zero confidence in themselves (Phil. 3:1-4) who uphold the Law. Paul teaches that they also fulfill it in that they are the ones in whom the Spirit enables to have power over sin.

So, at the end of all that’s been said, what are you going to do? You’re no longer on the wing of the airplane. You’re free falling to the ground. You can flap your arms really hard, trying with all your might to save yourself and it still won’t be enough. Or, you can trust the parachute graciously provided to you and rest in that grace. If you’re here today, you’ve heard the gospel. You understand you are a sinner who falls short of the glory of God. But you also understand Christ died for your sins to save you from eternal condemnation and separation from God forever in hell. I beg you today, be reconciled with God by trusting Christ as your Savior. If you’re a born-again Christian already, thank God for that gift because we all know we don’t deserve it.

¹ Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God’s Grace* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1973), 113.

² Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 76.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 66.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, Scripture Press, 1989), 1:522.

⁵ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Romans* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2022), 92.