

Thank God for the Good News!

Romans 3:21-31

October 15, 2017

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

Romans 3:21-31 (NIV)

This morning we are continuing our series on Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome. As some of you have pointed out, the first 2 ½ chapters so far have been rather depressing, other than the introduction in week one. Why? Because the first 2 ½ chapters, after the introduction, describe our human condition without God's intervention. This morning we have what some believe to be the most important verses in all the Bible. The great reformer Martin Luther being one of them.

In the Old Testament we have the story of Job. Job who had been blessed by God with everything any man could ask for: a faithful and loving wife, children, livestock, lots of land, as prosperous as they came back then. Job had everything a man could ever ask for and then God allowed Satan to take it all away, with the exception of Job's life here on earth. Yes, we can ultimately blame Satan, but the Bible tells us that God told Satan he could do it. It hardly seems fair. As much as we would like it to be, the truth is our life here on earth is not fair. Was it fair that Job was blessed by God with all those blessings before God allowed Satan to take them away? Was it fair that God chose the Israelites to be his people instead of the Egyptians? Is it fair that we have been fortunate to have been born in one of the most prosperous countries in all the world today, while others are born in some of the most impoverished nations? Is it fair when some parents are blessed with many children, even those who are not very good parents, while others who would make great parents can't have any? Is it fair when children get cancer and die early or are born with such disabilities that they can never experience a fruitful life here on earth? Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, there really has been very little about life here on earth that one could say is fair. In Job 9:2 (ESV), Job asks one of the most important questions anyone could ever ask, "How can a man be in the right before God?"

The first 2 ½ chapters of Romans, much the same way as almost the entire Old Testament after the first two chapters of Genesis, is rather depressing because it describes our human condition without God. But, our passage this morning, beginning in Romans 3:21 is a transition passage, which begins with two powerful words, which help us recognize that it is a transition passage, but now! Paul just got finished telling us that no one is good. Neither Jew or Greek, Israelites or Gentiles, no one:

None is righteous, no, not one: no one understands; no one seeks God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Romans 3:10-12

In answer to Job's question, "how can a man be made right before God?" the answer is, on our own it is impossible! One of the major, if not the major themes of Romans is "righteousness." It is often connected with the biblical doctrine of "justification."

But righteousness in the Bible is not so much about us doing right as it is about us being made right. As someone else has put it, "righteousness is the process by which God acts to put people in right relationship with himself."

Again, Paul just said in the first 2 ½ chapters of Romans we can't do it ourselves. Then we get to our passage today beginning in Romans 3:21 and Paul says, "But now!"

But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law has been made known (manifested itself, been revealed), to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

For the Jewish people they really believed that they were made right by keeping the Law. They knew that they could never keep the law perfectly, but they still believed that they were made right by keeping it the best they could. Which, when you think about it is really futile thinking. I mean at what point does one go from not being right to being right? Is it being able to keep 51% of the Law, 65%, 90%? Fortunately God took all our guess work away. God says if you want to make yourselves right, then you need to obey 100% of the Law. And while we might struggle with God's very high standards, the truth is we don't even come close. Our natural, human, sinful tendency is to think too highly of ourselves.

And another truth is that the Law, even in Old Testament times, under the Old Covenant or Covenants, was never meant to make people right before God. In fact God gave the Law for just the opposite reason. It's primary purpose was, and is, to show how impossible it is to measure up to God's standards by our own human efforts. The Law and the Prophets, which represents the entire Old Testament, were pointing to something better to come, the work of God in Christ, that which God planned from the very beginning, to reveal His saving righteousness by sending His Son as a sacrifice for us.

This righteousness comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely (and completely) by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Then Paul explains how this redemption through Jesus Christ came:

²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

God is not only a grace filled God, He is also a just God. Think about it, God could have extended His grace and mercy to sinners without Jesus' death on the cross, but He didn't. Why? Because that is not who God is. The God of grace and mercy is only a partial picture of who God is. God is also a righteous and just God who does not minimize those characteristics by offering His grace and mercy to us sinful human beings without a cost. The cost was the life of His Son, Jesus Christ. The entire essence of the Good News is right here in our passage this morning.

In a devotion this week John Piper offers this commentary on this exact passage from Romans 3:

“If the most terrifying news in the world is that we have fallen under the condemnation of our Creator and that he is bound by his own righteous character to preserve the worth of his glory by pouring out his wrath on our sin . . . Then the best news in all the world is that God has decreed a way of salvation that also upholds the worth of his glory, the honor of his Son, and the eternal salvation of all who put their faith in Him. He has given His Son to die for sinners and to conquer their death by His own resurrection.”

The Good News is that we are saved not by our righteousness but by God's righteousness and what He has done for us through Jesus. Actually there are many elements of God's righteousness that are present in our passage this morning. Seven on your outline this morning:

1. God's righteousness is apart from the Law

As already noted, God's Law was never meant to save us or make us right before Him. God's righteousness is in no way based on human achievement or anything else we can do in our own power. It's very important for us to understand that because “legalism” and works righteousness is just as alive today in the Christian church as it was among the Jewish people in the early church and all times in between.

2. God's righteousness comes through revelation – revealed to us in many different ways, including the Law and the Prophets. But the Law doesn't save us in any way, nor our own works. The Jews had great reverence for the Scriptures, but most of them failed to realize that although they were divinely inspired and revealed by God, the Scriptures themselves had no power to save, and they failed to realize that they were pointing the way to the one who does. One time Jesus said to a group of Jewish listeners:

You diligently study (and search) the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. Yet these are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.
John 5:39-40 (NIV)

3. God's righteousness is acquired by faith and through faith

That has always been the only way of salvation as far as man's part is concerned. That is the whole point of Hebrews 11, the great chapter on faith in the Bible. *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for* (Hebrews 11:1). Ancients meaning all the saints of the Old Testament. There has never been a means of salvation other than faith and trust in the one true God.

Righteousness or Justification by faith is a repeated theme of Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome. Why is it repeated over and over again? Because our natural, human default is to rely on ourselves, at least in some way, for salvation! Well then salvation is no longer a gift from God.

4. God's righteousness is provided for all

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference [or distinction] between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Not only is there no difference or distinction between Jew and Gentile, there is no difference or distinction between sins and sinners.

Just as everyone apart from Christ is equally sinful and rejected by God, everyone who is in Christ is equally righteous and accepted by God. Paul should know, even he who referred to himself as the worst of all sinners came to realize that he too could be saved. By today's judicial standards the apostle Paul before his conversion experience was a murderer. At the very least he was a conspirator in the deaths of many early Christians.

There is no difference or distinction between those that are saved. If my signature sin is gossip, I am saved through faith in Jesus Christ. How about lust, or homosexuality or other sexual sin? Judging others? Lying? Pride? How about if I murdered someone, in words or actually physically murdered someone? Saved through faith in Jesus Christ!

The Greek word that is found there, translated in English as "fall short," is really much more, or much less than just falling short. The basic meaning is being last or inferior. Every human being comes in last when it comes to being measured by God's righteousness.

5. God's Righteousness is Given Freely Through God's Grace:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 8:9a (NIV)

By definition, a gift is something given freely, unearned and unmerited by the recipient. God's greatest of all gifts is that of salvation through His Son. Whether salvation and righteousness are the exact same, or there are some slight differences, they both come through grace. Paul writes in Galatians 2:21, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

6. God's Righteousness is accomplished by Redemption/Atonement –

All are justified freely by his grace, through redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. Romans 3:24-25

Even those who were saved by God's grace through faith during Old Testament times, their redemption, the atonement for their sins, was accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross. For them it was God looking forward to Jesus' death on the cross, for us it is God looking back.

7. God's Righteousness does not cancel out the Law.

Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather we uphold the law.
Romans 3:31 (NIV)

God's righteousness leads us back to the Law, not in any shape or form which can save us, but with the recognition that in the Law is the way that God intends for us to live, and it is in the Law and the Prophets where we find our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Why is it important for us to understand the doctrine of righteousness or justification? Why is it important for us to understand our own fallenness and our own inability to be made right before God. Because thinking too highly of ourselves makes us think too lowly of God and it takes away from His glory and His honor and it affects our worship of Him. It also affects how we live our lives.

The late A.W. Tozer noted this way back in the middle of the 20th century, and I would say it is even more true today:

"Something has happened to the doctrine of justification . . . The faith of the apostle Paul and Martin 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 into 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."

A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*

A hundred years before A.W. Tozer was a man by the name of Horatius Bonar, a Pastor, Theologian, and gifted hymn writer who lived in Scotland in the 1800's. He is the author of many of the hymns in our hymnal, like *Blessing and Honor and Glory, I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say*, and *O Love of God*.

These are the words from another of his great hymns, captures the truth in our passage this morning: "Not what my Hands Have Done."

Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear an awful load.

Your work alone, O Christ
Can erase this weight of sin
Your blood alone, O Lamb of God
Can give me peace within
Your love to me, O God
Not mine, O Lord, to Thee
Can rid me of this dark unrest
And set my spirit free.

Your grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Your power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
No other work save yours,
No other blood will do;
No strength save that which is divine
Can bear me safely through.