



Righteousness Through Faith

Romans 3:21-26

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This morning our text is Romans 3:21-26. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 3, beginning at verse 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 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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we pray this morning that you would open up your Word, that by the power of your Holy Spirit your Word would take deep root in our hearts, that our eyes would be fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, that we would see the end of ourselves and our hope in Jesus. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Have you had the experience of waking up one morning, perhaps a Saturday morning, when everyone else is still asleep so the lights are off, and going into one of the rooms of your house that has curtains drawn across the window...? Now I don't mean just pretty curtains, these kind of lace curtains you can see through. I mean big, thick, heavy curtains, like at a hotel, that block out all the light.

You go up and grab the two curtains and thrust them open, and immediately the blazing sun comes in. Sometimes it's overwhelming. You can't even continue to look outside. You have to close your eyes. You have to look away as the darkness is dispelled by the blinding light. That's a picture of what Paul is doing with our text this morning. Paul is opening up the light of the hope of the gospel for all who know they are sinners.

This morning, I would like us to see about the righteousness God has that he gives to his people. I'd like us to look at two aspects of this righteousness. First, that there is a righteousness *for* us. There is a righteousness that comes *to* us. Then secondly, we see that this righteousness comes *from* Christ. It is a righteousness that we have, but it is not our own. It comes from Jesus. Righteousness *for* us; righteousness *from* Christ.

Righteousness For Us

Let's begin, then, by picking back up where we left off a few weeks ago. Up until this point, there has been a great deal of emphasis by Paul on sin. You may have asked the question, "Why is all this emphasis being placed on sin?" It may even remind you of the way our society views Christianity. It views Christianity as being negative, as always being critical, as always talking about bad things. Paul's message may seem to reinforce that, because he has been showing us over and over again our sin and our inability to save ourselves.

Now, this can be discouraging. It could even be depressing. It's like walking farther and farther down a dark tunnel, and you don't know where the end is or if there will be a light at the end of it. But all of that has been leading to our text here this morning. If we are to understand the gospel and why it is important, we have to see our need and our inability to make things right ourselves. God wants us to have no place left to turn but to him, and that's because he is the only place where hope is found.

We begin now to sense the shift right away in Paul's text. You have to remember (I've mentioned this before, but let me remind you) that the chapter divisions in the Bible are not inspired. The Holy Spirit didn't tell us when chapter 2 ends and chapter 3 begins. It's just something men have done in order to help us organize and memorize and read the Scriptures.

Where we are now is a new division of this letter. Paul had started the letter highlighting the power of the gospel. You may remember his initial statement. We said it was a theme verse for the whole of the book in chapter 1, verses 16-17, where Paul said, "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.'"

After that, Paul then went on an extended discussion from chapter 1, verse 18, all the way down to the previous verse, chapter 3, verse 20, about our need for the gospel. Now we have a new section of this letter beginning. Paul lets us know the shift is on as we begin in verse 21 with the words, "But now..." He's going to return to the power of the gospel. He's going to return to his discussion about the righteousness of God. He's going to pick up where he left off, as it were, in chapter 1, verse 17.

Paul wants us to see two sets of contrasts initially. That's what the "But now..." is here for. First, he wants us to see a contrast of justification through works of the law as he described in chapter 3, verse 20, and justification *without* the law or the works of the law that he's going to talk about in our text this morning. There is a contrast he's drawing. The *but* is there to get your attention.

There also is another set of contrasts. It's the contrast between the manifestation of this new unforeseen hope in the coming of Jesus Christ and the time *before* the coming of Christ. This is the windows fully drawn open, the light pouring in, as Jesus Christ has come to reveal the righteousness of God. You may then ask, "What is the righteousness of God?" Paul talks about it in verse 21.

It has been manifested apart from the law. It's the same thing we saw in chapter 1, verse 17. It is that radical, perfect righteousness that comes from outside of us. It is an expression of God's perfection, of his holiness, of God's justice, but more than that, it is the very power of salvation. It is the only way to stand before God. That's what the righteousness of God is, and now, Paul tells us, this is manifested.

Now what does it mean to be *manifested*? It means it has been shown or displayed by God. To put it in very simple terms, now we can see it. We can see the righteousness of God because God has made it so. What does it look like? Well, first and foremost, it is not through anything we can say or do. Paul makes this clear in verse 21. This has been manifested *apart* from the law.

When Paul uses this phrase *the law* we have to be careful, because Paul can use the phrase *the law* in different ways. Sometimes he means the law code that was given to Moses. Sometimes he means the books of the law, the Old Testament. Other times he means the works of the law, like he does in verse 20. That principle is contrary to justification by grace.

Paul says this manifestation is apart from the law; that is, the works of the law he has just mentioned in the previous verse. This word *apart* carries with it the connotation of completely independent of or in the total absence of. What Paul is saying to us is this righteousness is demonstrated, manifested before us, and nowhere that you look could you find any of the works of the law. It's not 90 percent law works. It's not 50 percent law works. It's not 2 percent law works. It's completely independent of the works of the law.

What Paul is doing is being very clear here, that there is no contribution we can make to the righteousness of God. There's no preparation we can make to get the ball rolling. There's no addition or helpfulness we can bring in to do our part. There's not even anything we can do afterward that adds to the justification we get, that adds to the righteousness of God.

It's like the way you get a bill from your health insurance company. You go to see the doctor, and then they send you a letter that says, "This is not a bill, but get ready; the bill is coming." It's your copay. Even though the work has been done and even though there's nothing left, you still owe. You still have to come clean. That's not how the righteousness of God works. God doesn't ask. He doesn't want. He doesn't need. He will not take your contribution beforehand, during, or after.

Paul says it as clearly as it is possible. This truth about justification is not new. Paul says it was displayed; it was borne witness to by the Law and the Prophets. Here he means the whole of the Old Testament. We can see this easily, because at the very beginning of the Old Testament, in Genesis 3, right after the fall, in the midst of all of the carnage that comes from the fall, God gives a promise to Adam and Eve. That promise is a promise of deliverance in Genesis 3:15.

It's the first promise of the gospel. The promise is that *God* will do a work, that *he* will send a deliverer, that *he* will defeat the Enemy. It's exactly what God says to Abraham in Genesis, chapters 12 and 22. He says all nations would be blessed through Abraham's offspring. Paul reminds us in Galatians, chapter 3, that when he says *offspring* he doesn't mean all y'all. He means one, singular: Jesus. All will be blessed through Jesus.

It's prefigured in the sacrificial system. Every time a sacrifice was made under the authority of the Old Testament, it was a prefiguring of the work of Jesus. Think about what the sacrificial system means. I'm not right with God, and I need to find someone else to atone for my sin. I need someone else or something else to make it right. Over and over again, week upon week, day upon day, year upon year, decade upon decade, that truth was being trumpeted by the Law and the Prophets.

It perhaps comes to a crescendo in the Prophets, perhaps one of the greatest prophetic chapters in all of the Old Testament, Isaiah 53, where we are told that one was wounded that we could be healed, that one was struck down that we might have life. All of the Law and the Prophets speak to this righteousness that comes to us from God. So don't be upset that the Bible talks about sin. This is so we don't run after a false hope. Stop trying to please God. Look to the righteousness that God has provided in Jesus.

That brings us to the next practical question...*How do I get this righteousness?* After all, that's the great advantage of the works of the law. I know what I'm supposed to do, but if I don't have that, how do I get this righteousness? How does it come to me? Paul tells us this. If I can't do anything, where do I turn? If I'm alone in the dark with no way out, where do I go?

Imagine that you are with the boys in Asia in the cave. You remember the story from this summer. What do they do? They're lost and they're in the cave. They don't know what to do. Can they get themselves out? No, they can't. They realize they can't even *try* to get themselves out because that will make their situation even worse. They have to wait for someone from outside to come and save them.

That's a picture of our lives. We cannot strive and struggle to save ourselves. We need a righteousness that comes from God and is received by us through faith alone. This righteousness has been shown by God, but it needs to come to us to make a difference in our lives. That is the power of the gospel. It's not simply a standard that's held out that's impossible to experience. No. The righteousness has been manifested in Christ, and Christ can be ours.

The Lord has provided not only a solution but access to that solution. Righteousness comes to us by relationship. Paul is very clear here. He says, "The righteousness of God comes *through* faith." He uses an instrumental preposition. This preposition *through* means through or on account of or because of. It is faith that brings the righteousness to us, but it's not just *any* faith. Do you see this? It's not just a vague notion.

Paul doesn't say the righteousness comes to us through faith in being spiritual, through faith in thinking about a higher power. No, he says it comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith has a specific object. It is Jesus. The grammar is very clear here. Jesus is the object of faith that brings righteousness. That makes sense, after all, because Jesus, the Bible tells us, *is* the righteousness of God.

What then is faith? Well, along with Paul, I'm glad you asked that. Faith is simple. It's so simple the Bible tells us we are to be like children when we have faith, but we still have to be careful not to limit the definition of faith. Faith starts with knowledge. It starts with understanding. It is knowing the truth as it is set forth in the Bible.

There is an element of thinking in faith. It involves understanding the truth. Faith is not just an emotion. It is not a blind leap in the dark. Faith knows who God is, who I am, and who Jesus is, but faith also involves personal agreement. Theologians call this *assent* or *belief*. It means the truth in the Bible applies to me. It is one thing to say, "Jesus saves sinners." It is another thing to say, "I am a sinner, and I need Jesus to save me."

If you think about it, we have all sorts of knowledge rattling around in our heads. There are all sorts of things we know about countries and cities and rulers and gadgets and cars, but on some level we know something is true, but we may not really care that it's true. It doesn't have any affect on us. I can tell you how tall the Eiffel Tower is. It doesn't really matter to me. If it was 10 feet taller it would be fine. If it was 10 feet shorter, that would be fine too.

I've never been there. I've never climbed it. I know the fact, but it doesn't affect me at all. Faith involves not just knowing but having that knowledge affect *you*, having it take root in *your* life, be important to *you*, be significant to *you*. Most importantly, faith involves trust. This is not only *knowing* the truth, not only knowing it applies to me, but committing myself *to* that truth. It is placing my trust in Jesus Christ to be my righteousness, forsaking all other avenues of hope.

You may have heard the example that is often given of faith by preachers in this sense. It's a good example, so I think I'll use it. If you were coming to the edge of a great cavern that was very wide and so deep you couldn't see the bottom and you knew there was a bridge that goes across this cavern, and because it's a cavern it has to be one of those rickety wood and jungle vine bridges, but if someone came up to you and said, "You could cross this cavern on this bridge; this bridge is very sound..."

That person could give you all of the detailed information about this bridge...who built it, what kind of material it's made out of, how long it has been weathered, how many pounds per square inch it can hold. He could make a Texas A&M engineer graduate blush. All of that would be well and good, but it doesn't mean anything until you step foot out on the bridge, because when you step foot out on the bridge, then you're trusting that the bridge is going to hold. You're committed to the bridge holding. You're believing and understanding that knowledge and acting on it. That is the crux of faith.

We could say we know things about Jesus. We could say Jesus is important to us, but until it makes a difference in our lives it's not true saving faith. That's what saving faith does. When times are hard, when your marriage is a mess, when your finances are in disarray, when your child is sick, when you don't think you can pass that exam, when your boss is all over you all day long, that's when you need faith in Christ. We need to trust him when times are hard, to trust his promise that he has given to us.

This passage comes to you today. Maybe you've heard it before. You've probably been here many times before. You've probably heard the Bible explained to you. It has been taught in your home. You can answer the Sunday school questions that are posed to you. You can say all of the right things. That is good, but it's not enough. The faith that grasps the righteousness of God in Christ cannot hold on to anything else. You must let go of all other supports and hold only onto Jesus.

There's a third important aspect to this righteousness of God, and it shows us that we cannot be right with God without it. It shows us that we can receive it only by faith, but there is always something effective about this righteousness that comes to us by faith. Paul is making clear to us that there is only one hope we have. He has spent more than two chapters telling us that our sin keeps us from God. Here he makes perhaps the most famous statement in all of the Bible about sin in verse 23.

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Many of you know that verse by heart. For others of you, as soon as I started to read it it became familiar, but have you ever asked yourself the question, "What is that verse doing here?" This passage is all about righteousness and justification and hope and deliverance. Why does Paul stick the prototypical passage on universal sin here in the middle of this?

What Paul is saying here is that this applies to everyone. There's no distinction. There's no difference. He's summarizing all of what he said earlier in the chapter in this one brief phrase, that everyone is in the category of sinners, and everyone is in a present state of failing to uphold God's standard. There's no need to wonder if what he's saying about faith applies to you or not.

Paul says it applies to sinners, and then he says everyone is a sinner. So guess what? That includes you. But it gets better. Look at verse 22. Paul says, "...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." It's not just that all are sinners. The righteousness of God applies to everyone who believes. It's not just a possibility. Everyone who believes has the righteousness of God. This is an important distinction.

Back in the 90s, when I was attending the University of Michigan, the University of Michigan football program had open tryouts. Anyone could try out for the football team. I will tell you this with metaphysical certainty: if I had tried out to make the Michigan football team, I would not have made the team, even if I was in the best shape of my life, which I wasn't then. Just because I had an opportunity doesn't mean I would have the possession.

Paul says this is not an opportunity before you to *maybe* have the righteousness of God. *All* who believe, everyone, without exception. Just like everyone is under sin, all who believe have the righteousness of God. So you can come to Jesus with confidence. If you believe on him, trust him, and trust what he has done, he will never turn you away. If you know that Jesus is God, that he has lived the perfect life and died for sins, *your* sins, on the cross, then you have the righteousness of God. It is your *only* hope, but it is the *perfect* hope.

Righteousness From Christ

Secondly, we see how this comes about. How do we have this righteousness of God? We're always talking as Christians about believing in Jesus, but why? Have you ever asked yourself that question? What does Jesus do that makes a difference? Now Paul is about to explain to us why Jesus is important, what he has done, and why he can reconcile us to God. He's going to show us that this righteousness of God comes to us from Christ.

He starts with a general statement in verse 24. He says, "...justified by his grace as a gift." Those who believe in Christ are justified. That is, they're pronounced right before God. This is done apart from the law, so it is by God's grace. It is his gift. We've talked about grace before, but one good way to remember what grace is with the acronym God's Riches At Christ's Expense. That is, Jesus purchases for us what we don't deserve.

Grace means more than unmerited favor. It means more than I don't deserve it. It actually means de-merited favor. It means I deserve the opposite. I deserve condemnation, and I get justification. God looks upon sinners, and he declares them righteous. He does this freely. Paul makes this clear by not only talking about grace but by saying that grace is free.

Our translation says, "As a gift." This is an adverb that's used to mean completely free. *As a gift*. This is how grace comes to us. Grace itself is gracious and free, but Paul says it's like free free grace. Do you get the picture? But there *is* one thing. We must not confuse the freeness of the gift with a lack of cost to the giver. You can understand this just from everyday life. Right, kids?

How many of you kids on Christmas morning have gone down and gone under the tree and gotten a present and opened it up? I bet a lot of you. I bet none of you after you opened your presents had to look and find your wallet and give Mom and Dad \$20. Right? It was free. It was a free gift, but does that mean it came without a cost? No. Those of you who are bigger kids know it is not without a cost.

The reason the gift can be free is because someone else has paid the cost. We have to understand this with the principle of free grace. Justification comes to *us* freely, but it is not without cost to God. Paul then moves on to the human aspect of justification, the man-ward aspect. He uses this word *redemption*. He says it is through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. This word is used to describe paying the ransom price to deliver someone from bondage.

In Paul's day, there would be slave markets, and someone could go to a slave market and pay the price for a slave and then give the slave his freedom. He could pay the price, redeem the slave, and make him free. In a similar way, the Bible talks about Jesus paying the price to free us from sin and condemnation. Jesus puts it this way in Mark 10: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Paul says it this way in Ephesians 1: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses..." This is what Jesus gives to us, but there is more to salvation in Christ than redemption. Paul moves on to a second aspect. He says in verse 25, "...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith."

This is a hard word. It's a hard word to read, it's a hard word to pronounce, and it's a hard word to understand. It's because it's about something people don't like to talk about, because this word *propitiation* is about the bloody aspect of Christianity. People like Jesus when he's holding children. People like Jesus when he's teaching on kindness, but they don't like *this*, because this is about the horrible, bloody sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. This is what *propitiation* means.

First, it means that God is angry with sin and that God is ready to visit his wrath on sin and on sinners. We don't like this. We try to talk about it in terms of that God hates the sin but loves the sinner, but that's not strictly speaking true, because if the sinner continues in sin, guess what: God hates the sinner, and he punishes the sinner and visits his wrath on the sinner. He's under God's judgment.

The wrath of God must be satisfied. If God just ignored sin, he wouldn't be God. He wouldn't be just. It would not be right. Sin must be punished. But that's our problem: we can't pay that penalty. We have no hope of resolving our sin problem. So what does God do? Jesus becomes the sacrifice for sin. That's what the word *propitiation* means. In other places it's translated *mercy seat* or the place where the sacrifices were brought in the Old Testament.

Jesus stands in our place and takes the punishment we deserve for sin. It's not as if God just winks and looks and says, "Oh, it's okay. Don't worry about it." No. Jesus pays the penalty. But I don't want you to see God the Father as some stern figure who needs to be won over by Jesus. Paul puts it this way. He says, "...whom God put forward as a propitiation..." It's not as if God needs Jesus' death to make him love us. No, no. He loved us first, and that's why he sent Jesus to pay our penalty.

God put him forward, Paul says. The word here means he took the initiative. He purposed this. God put Jesus forward to pay the penalty for our sin. Doesn't that give you great hope? Jesus came and died so you might be free from sin and so you might not be under the wrath of God. All of this was accomplished because God determined to love you and to save you. God is not your enemy but your loving Father who paid your debt so you could have a relationship with him.

This brings us to our final point this morning. The righteousness we have from Christ that saves us from sin, death, and hell comes to us because of God's purpose. So often we think about salvation as being about us, how we can escape hell and punishment, how we can get the blessings of heaven, but salvation is really about God reaching out and displaying his righteousness and his glory.

There's a problem with forgiveness. If forgiveness is free, then there's no justice. That would make God a liar. The answer is found in Jesus. Paul says in verse 26 that God delayed visiting full and final judgment. It's called *forbearance*. He has passed over sin, but that is just a suspension of the judgment. It is not forgiveness, but in satisfying the punishment of sin Jesus allows God to be just and also to forgive.

This is one of the great truths of the Scriptures that Paul says in verse 26: God is just *and* the justifier. The justifier of whom? Of the one who has faith in Jesus. Do you see how Paul puts that? It's so clear, it's so direct, and it's so personal. It's one of the few instances where Paul just uses Jesus' personal name: Jesus. He doesn't use his title. He doesn't say, "Our Lord Jesus Christ." He's making it very personal for you, the one who has faith in Jesus.

Do you have faith in Jesus today? Do you know that he died to satisfy the wrath of God for sin? Do you know that he redeems the sinner from the power of sin? Have you put all your trust in him, forsaking all others? If so, then you know the good news of the gospel. If you don't know that yet, then I call upon you to give up all of your doing and to trust in Jesus. He is the only hope for sinners.