

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS

Romans 3:21-31

Key Verse: 3:22a

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

In 1:18-3:20, Paul made the charge that all human beings are under the power of sin and deserve God's righteous judgment. He universally declared, **“There is no one righteous, not even one”** (3:10b). This is mankind's condition under the power of sin. We feel that all people are like criminals on death row, awaiting the day of execution, with no hope. We are fearful, anxious, and driven by desperation. No matter how hard we try, we cannot get out of this situation. When people hear this, they may think it is too pessimistic a view of mankind. They say, “I am so tired of hearing about sin and judgment - just stop talking about it! There are many good things in mankind.” Then they point to noble leaders, like Gandhi, and to human achievements as signs of hope. There is some basis for this claim. We have made some progress in social justice, general knowledge, medicine, technology, and so on. Some places seem to be like paradise.

However, as we know, though human civilization has developed, human nature is ever the same - even getting worse. The sins of today are the same as the sins of 2,000 years ago. To God, human progress is secondary; sin matters to God. People try to improve themselves in many ways: working hard, studying diligently, doing good deeds, improving their manner and lifestyle, and so on. But to God, still, they are terrible sinners: hardworking sinners, educated sinners, moralistic sinners, elegant sinners. In terms of salvation, no one can help themselves; only God can help us. God, who is so merciful, reached out to mankind to save us. Let's learn what God did for us.

First, all are justified freely by his grace (21-26). Verses 21-26 are tightly packed with deep and meaningful words. Some Bible scholars consider them the center and heart of the whole letter,¹ and even the most important single paragraph ever written.² These verses can be divided into three parts: God's righteousness is given through faith in Jesus (21-22); how God's

¹ Cranfield, Charles E.B., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentary* (T. and T. Clark, 1895; fifth edition, 1902), p.199.

² Morris, Leon, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 173.

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righteousness came (23-25a); God's purpose in demonstrating his righteousness (25b-26).

God's righteousness is given through faith in Jesus. Verse 21 begins with the words, "**But now...**" which mark a great turning point. Paul has talked about man's desperate situation under the law. But now, there is a wonderful hope in Christ. In the past there was only a guilty feeling, judgment and condemnation. But now, there is forgiveness of sins, understanding and love. In the past, there was horrible judgment and wrath, but now there is saving grace. Paul switches from the realm of law to that of grace. After the dark night, the sun has risen, a new day has dawned, and the world is flooded with light. It is the great turning point that divides B.C. and A.D., not only in human history, but also in one's life.

Let's read verse 21a. "**But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known...**" The key words here are "**the righteousness of God.**" How do you feel when you hear these words? At one time, these words terrified Martin Luther. But when he understood them, he felt reborn and as if he had entered into paradise.³ This righteousness of God is "**apart from the law.**" In fact, God began his work of salvation far before the law was introduced, by calling one man, Abraham. He promised that all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring (Gen 12:2-3). Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). God confirmed this promise with an oath (Gen 22:15-18). Hundreds of years later, the Jewish law was given through Moses. Since then God spoke to his people through the prophets at many times and in various ways. And at last, God's salvation work was fulfilled through Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1-2). This was done totally by God's grace and only through faith. "**The righteousness of God**" refers to the historical death of Christ and its effect on mankind.⁴ This righteousness of God apart from law is testified to by the Law and the Prophets, that is, the Old Testament (21b; Lk 24:44; Jn 5:39). This means that there is indisputable evidence that God has carried out his salvation plan throughout history. This righteousness didn't come as the alternative to the law, but was rather planned from the beginning, was hidden in the Old Testament, and has now been revealed in the New Testament (Ro 16:25-26).

³ From the preface to the Wittenberg edition of his Latin works (1545); cf. Luther's Works, American edition, 34 (1960), 336f.

⁴ Stott, John, Romans: God's Good News for the World (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), p.109.

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Let's read verse 22. **"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile..."** Here, righteousness is one of God's attributes, and, at the same time, God's declaration to make a sinner righteous. God imparts his righteousness to us. This righteousness is not earned with human effort but given freely by God. It is a gift of grace. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, **"God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."** Though this grace is offered to all human beings, it is only effective for those who believe in Jesus Christ (22a,25a,26). For them, it is life-changing and the most joyful news. However, for those who refuse, it is not effective. Whoever believes in Jesus can enjoy this grace whether they are Jew or Gentile.

Verses 23-25a tell us how God's righteousness came. In order to explain this, Paul tells us what state human beings were in, and how we were redeemed. Verse 23 says, **"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."** Here, **"sin"** includes original sin inherited from Adam, as well as all the personal sins that each of us commits. Sin means to go astray from God's intended purpose, like an arrow missing its target. The phrase **"fall short of the glory of God"** means "not living up to God's standard."

God made man in his own image and was so happy (Gen 1:31). God created man, unlike animals, to live a noble life morally and spiritually. Man was originally righteous, holy, compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and loving (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10,12-14). Man, however, disobeyed God's word and became corrupt. Mankind lost God's glorious image and became just flesh, like animals (Gen 6:3). Man misses God's original purpose and falls below his standard. The verb **"fall short"** stresses that this is a continual falling short all the time, not just one or two mistakes. The word **"all"** indicates that this is the state of all people without exception. We like to compare ourselves with others and find how we are a little better. This makes us feel good for a few minutes. But when we look at God's standard, we fall so short that our petty comparisons are totally irrelevant. We all deserve God's judgment.

God, however, had mercy on mankind and reached out to save us. Verse 24a says, **"...and all are justified freely by his grace..."** Here, **"justified"** is a legal term which means "declared righteous in court." Its

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opposite is “condemned.” Both are the pronouncements of a judge - the final verdict which establishes our status. **“Justified”** means “given free forgiveness,” like a pardon.⁵ But pardon only deals with the remission of a penalty. Justified is more than that. It has an additional positive aspect which means conferring a righteous status - coming into God’s favor and having fellowship with him. The verdict **“justified”** implies: “You may come; you are welcome to all my love and my presence.”⁶ When God says to somebody, “You are justified,” the sinner is righteous, really and truly, outwardly and inwardly, wholly and completely.⁷ It means forgiveness of sins and becoming God’s child.

Justification is done only by God’s grace and given freely. Here, there is nothing human beings did. God didn’t require even .1% of ransom from us, but saved us 100% by grace. If God had demanded even .1% of ransom, there would have been no one who could be saved, for people are all corrupt and unable to pay anything. It is only by God’s grace and mercy that we are saved from the power of sin and death and become God’s children. Therefore, we should not try to add anything to our salvation. We should not try to clean ourselves up first. This is self-righteousness, which is opposed to God’s righteousness. We simply need to accept that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Then amazingly, the power of sin which binds us so strongly is broken, and we can enjoy true freedom, joy and peace. For example, a robber on a cross confessed his sins and pleaded, **“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”** (Lk 23:42). Jesus accepted him as he was and said, **“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise”** (Lk 23:43). We need only to come to Jesus as we are. “Just as I am without one plea but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidd’st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come! I come!” (Hymn 343) Let’s come to Jesus just as we are! Jesus will remove all our dirty sins and clothe us with his righteousness.

In verse 24, the words **“are justified”** in Greek are a present passive participle. They mean “always,” “all the time.” Of course, we cannot always live holy lives though we are children of God. One day, we determine not to sin anymore, but then find ourselves weak and commit sins repeatedly. We

⁵ Sanday, William and Headlam, Arthur C., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentary* (T. and T. Clark, 1985: Fifth edition, 1902), p.36: “justification ‘is simply Forgiveness, Free Forgiveness.’”

⁶ Loane, Marcus, *This Surpassing Excellency: Textual Studies in the Epistle to the Churches of Galatia and Philippi* (Angus and Robertson, 1969), p.94.

⁷ Stott, John, *Ibid.*, p.111.

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despair and condemn ourselves. We wonder how we can come to God. We also doubt that God will forgive our sins once again. But God is not like we think. Though we repeatedly commit sins, God always makes us righteous as long as we trust in him. God is faithful to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1Jn 1:9). God's grace is so deep and wide that it never runs out.

How did this justification come about? Verse 24b says, **"...through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."** **"Redemption"** is a commercial term used in the slave markets of those times. A slave couldn't get out of slavery all by himself; he had to be set free by someone who paid the price for him. In the Old Testament the word **"redeemed"** described the Israelites' release from captivity in Egypt (Ex 6:6), and again in Babylon (Isa 43:1). This points to a spiritual reality. Jesus said that sin enslaves people: **"...everyone who sins is a slave to sin"** (Jn 8:34). People become slaves to lust, greed, pride, anger, selfishness, jealousy and so on. Even though we know we must master these sinful desires, we fail to do so. It is because Satan's power binds us through our sins. To be set free, we need the help of a stronger power (Mk 3:27).

The stronger power is God Almighty. In the book of Isaiah, God is repeatedly referred to as our **"Redeemer."** God exerts his mighty power to set us free from the bondage of sin. His power is sufficient to liberate us from any kind of bondage, including eating disorders, pornography, addiction to drugs and alcohol, and gaming, and more. As a young teenager, Kirsten Haglund discovered ballet, and loved to dance. But when she compared her body to those of other dancers, she felt too fat. So she developed her own set of rules for eating and rigorously applied them. She spent the next three years in bondage to anorexia. She lost touch with her emotions and became isolated and lonely. One day, while punishing her body on the treadmill, she had a breakdown. She had to seek treatment. Through a friend, she was introduced to the Psalms. As she read, the words jumped off the page and spoke to her: **"my tears have been my food all day long."** She found that Jesus understood her, loved her and accepted her. His love broke the chains of her bondage and set her free. Some time later, she went on to win the Miss USA beauty pageant.⁸ Now she has a clear identity as a child of God and only

⁸ <https://www.iamsecond.com/seconds/kirsten-haglund/>

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praises him for his great grace to her. No matter what kind of sin may bind us, God can set us free when we put our faith in Christ Jesus.

Though our redemption comes freely by grace, it was very costly for God to accomplish. Verse 25a says, **“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood--to be received by faith.”** **“Sacrifice of atonement”** is most literally translated as “propitiation.” “Propitiation” implies the satisfaction of wrath. God’s wrath against the godlessness and wickedness of people is inevitable because God is holy (1:18). God’s anger is aroused by evil. No one and nothing can satisfy God’s righteous anger because there is no one righteous before God. But God, in his great mercy, has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. God has given the sacrifice to make atonement for his people. In sum, God’s own great love propitiated his own holy wrath through the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, who bore our sin and died for us on the cross.

The **“sacrifice of atonement”** originated in the Old Testament (Lev 16:14). Sinful man could come to the Holy God only through the blood of a sacrifice. There is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (Lev 17:11). However, the blood of animals was insufficient to be a fundamental solution (Heb 7:27-28). Only the blood of Jesus, the sinless Son of God, completely and permanently satisfies God’s righteousness. Jesus’ blood has power to cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God (Heb 9:13-14). The blood of Jesus has power to truly change us into new creations. Jesus offered himself as a perfect and eternal sacrifice **“once and for all”** (Heb 9:12). Now we can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence anytime and anywhere (Heb 4:16; 10:19).

God’s purpose in demonstrating his righteousness. Let’s look at verses 25b-26. **“He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished - 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.”** Why did God have to demonstrate his righteousness? It was because mankind had become too depraved, judgmental and self-righteous to recognize God’s righteousness. Instead of finding the cause of evil in our own sin, we blamed God, accused God and blasphemed God. God wants to restore in mankind the truth that he is righteous. God’s purpose of choosing Abraham was to restore

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God's righteousness and justice on earth (Gen 18:19). Jesus taught us to pray for God's name to be hallowed as our first prayer topic (Mt 6:9).

God demonstrated his righteousness through the cross of Jesus. There are two things we need to understand about this. First, in the cross, God punished the sins of all people of all times who believe in him. For example, when God justified Abraham, he **“credited him”** as righteous. This declaration was not random or arbitrary; it looked forward to the cross, where Jesus paid for Abraham's sin too. Though God forbears sins in his patient love, he will bring every sin into judgment. No sin will remain unpunished. God's righteousness is absolute. Secondly, in the cross God saved sinners without compromising his righteousness. He became like the judge who passed judgment on his friend without compromise, but then took his friend's place and was punished for him. God wants us to know the truth that he is righteous so that we may honor him and manifest his righteousness.

Second, Paul defended God's righteousness (27-31). Apostle Paul taught that both Jews and Gentiles are sinners before God. Salvation is only possible by faith and is made available to both. This would have been shocking to the Jews. Paul anticipates three questions related to justification by faith alone.

The first question: Where, then, is boasting? (27-28). The Jews were immensely proud of being God's chosen people. They were also proud of their personal righteousness. Boasting was not limited to them. The Gentile world also boasted (Ro 1:30). In fact, all human beings are inveterate boasters. But when we are saved by faith, boasting is excluded. It is because salvation comes only by God's grace, not by our effort (27b). Our Christian conviction is that a person is justified by faith alone apart from the works of the law (28). All boasting is excluded except boasting in Christ (1Co 1:31).

The second question: Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? (29-30). The Jews were extremely conscious of their special covenant relationship with God. It was a great privilege for them. However, they didn't realize that the Gentiles would ultimately be included, too. They didn't know God's universal love toward all mankind (Gen 12:2b; Gal 3:7-9, 16). God is not the God of Jews only; he is the God of Gentiles too (29), since there is only one God, who has only one way of salvation. He will justify the circumcised (Jews) by faith and the uncircumcised (Gentiles) through that

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same faith (30). Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are all brothers and sisters, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender social status, wealth or education.

The third question: Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith (31)?
When Paul emphasizes the theme of “**by faith alone,**” it seems that the law becomes useless. However, the principle of faith doesn’t nullify the law, rather, it upholds the law. It is because the law was completed by faith. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). Jesus kept the law fully, fulfilled all of its requirements, and shed his blood on the cross as the perfect sacrifice. Jesus is the culmination of the law (Ro 10:4). Furthermore, faith in Jesus enables us to keep the law through the Holy Spirit.

In this passage we have learned that God gives his righteousness to us through faith in Christ. Let’s accept his gracious gift by faith alone and live to manifest true righteousness for the glory of God.