

## **Romans: God, in the Gospel of His Son (III)**

**Romans 3:21-26**

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*September 17, 2000*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 3, as we continue to look at this great passage from Romans 3:21-26 in which Paul begins to set forth the good news. Over and over we've said in Romans 1 and 2, and the first part of Romans 3 from Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20, that Paul has been establishing the good news, by explaining the bad news. He has told us that we are all in need, that we all stand condemned, that we're all in sin. And so in Romans 3:21 when he begins to announce the good news it makes sense. There's a context to it. We are in desperate need for the good news which he is explaining here.

But as we've seen the last couple of weeks, Paul says some rather surprising things. For instance, if you'll look at verse 21 he says that apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made manifest. He told us in Romans 1:17 that the gospel displayed the righteousness of God, but here he says something surprising. That the righteousness of God is displayed in the gospel apart from our law works, apart from our obedience, apart from our merits, and he goes on to say that it is a righteousness which is through faith in Jesus Christ.

And then if you look at verses 23 and 24, the passage that we focused on last time, he begins to elaborate on this: This righteousness that we need. You remember the great question is what stands a man before God. On the judgment day how is that I am going to stand before the throne of God, bold and unafraid of judgment, knowing that I'm a sinner. How am I going to stand boldly? Paul says, "Well there's this righteousness that's apart from your obedience which is displayed in the gospel." And he begins to explain that in more detail in verses 23 and 24. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Apart from Christ, standing before that judgment throne, the verdict is going to be you missed the point. God made you for fellowship, God made you to display His glory. You haven't trusted in Christ, you haven't received the gospel, you've missed the whole point of life. Paul says, "In Christ, all those who trust in Him are justified freely." They are declared righteous before God, freely as a gift of His grace. So that on the judgment day, all those who trust in Christ will stand before God and instead of the verdict of their sins being pronounced upon their own heads, the

verdict will be 'You're perfectly righteous. You are absolutely sinless in the eyes of God. You are declared to be holy and righteous and just by God because of the Lord Jesus Christ as you have trusted in Him.'

Now this raises several questions in our mind. How can this be? The apostle Paul knows that and that's exactly what he's going to explain for us in verses 25 and 26 today. So let's hear God's holy word, beginning in verse 21.

But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets. Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe, for there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed for the demonstration I say of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for this word. Protect us again from its familiarity. Strike us in our hearts with a new appreciation for the depth of its truth. Enable us not simply to understand, but to embrace the message of Your free justification that we might stand boldly before You on the last day. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Many, if not most, if not all of you, have heard at some time or another someone ask the two EE (Evangelism Explosion) diagnostic questions. The first of those questions has to do with one's assurance of salvation. The second of those questions has to do with what one is basing one's assurance on. Why one thinks one ought to be assured of salvation. And so you've heard perhaps someone even ask you the question, "If you were to die tonight, are you sure that you would have eternal life?" Or, "Are you confident that you would go to heaven?" And then you've heard that second question. "Well, let's suppose, God forbid, that you were to die tonight and stand before God, and He were to say to you why should I let you into My heaven? What would you say?"

The first question deals with whether you feel assured of salvation, whether you are confident of acceptance with God. The second question asked this, what are you basing that confidence on? There are perhaps many who don't have assurance of salvation, and that lack of assurance and salvation is a pointer to the fact that they do not have a real embrace of Christ by faith. And so we use those diagnostic questions.

Well, there is a campus minister here in Mississippi who has added a third diagnostic question, and he likes to ask this of covenant children, because he knows that if you've been in an evangelical church in Mississippi, chances are you're going to know the right words to say when those first two questions are asked. And he's wanting to try and find out how he can really cut to the chase and see what you really think, and so he's added a third question. He asks the first question. If you were to die tonight, would you have eternal life, would you go to heaven? He then asks and if you were to stand before God, and He were to say why should I let you into My heaven? What would you say? And assuming that they give the answer "Well, because I trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin." He then says, "Okay, I've got a third question for you. So what? What if God says to you when you say that, 'So what?'"

Now, I'm not trying to be irreverent, but you understand what he's getting at. He knows that lots of people can mouth the right words to answer that second question but have no idea why that answer is the right answer. They have no idea why it is that Jesus Christ had to die, bleeding for the propitiation of our sins. Why it is that we must trust alone in Him alone for salvation? Why it is a combination of our faith and our works and His works and our works. They know the right words, but they don't know the why behind the right words, and so he presses that question home.

There's a real sense here in verses 25 and 26 that that's precisely what Paul is doing. He's telling us, he's explaining the why behind the answer I am trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation as He has offered in the gospel. He is explaining why it is that that is the only way that a person enters into and remains in saving fellowship with God. I'd like you to see three or four things in these two very short verses today.

### **I. Justification is based upon Christ's bearing and satisfying the wrath of God.**

First, if you'd look at the first few words of verse 25. Really, you have to look at the last two words of verse 24 and the first few words of verse 25. Christ Jesus whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. In this little phrase Paul is telling us that justification is based upon Christ bearing our sin and satisfying the wrath of God.

This is the first thing that Paul teaches us in this passage that justification, our being declared righteous on the last day, is based upon Christ bearing our sin and turning away appeasing, satisfying the wrath of God. The question perhaps is put to Paul. How can it be, Paul? How could you have just told me that justification is free. You have just told me that justification is a gift. You've just told me that God justifies us by grace. How then, Paul, the question goes, can

free justification be just? How can it be right for God to freely forgive sinners who really are guilty? How can God be the righteous God and freely forgive people for their sins? And the apostle Paul is answering that question here in this little phrase. And his answer is, "Divine blood atonement." That's how God can be just. That's how God can be righteous. Divine blood atonement. He points us to the work of Christ on the cross, and he says God's free forgiveness of you is right and just because He did not slide your sins under the carpet, He paid for them by the blood of His own Son.

I'd like you to see three or four things that he says just in those little phrases. I was studying this week. I realized that I really should have preached the sermon on this phrase. I would about have time to do justice to this phrase and this sermon. As it is now, it's only a fourth of what I have to say today, so I'm going to hurry through it. But notice three or four things that we see just in this phrase.

First of all, notice the emphasis on the work of Christ on the cross. It doesn't say, because Jesus is a great moral teacher, believe in Him. It doesn't say, because Jesus lived this impeccable, wonderful life, believe on Him. It says that Christ Jesus was displayed as a propitiation in His blood. So the emphasis is on the shedding of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ as necessary and fundamental for you being declared righteous before God.

There are a lot of people that don't like that message. They say, ooh, you know, you evangelicals, you teach this slaughterhouse religion, whereby you say that God in order to forgive has to visit His Son with wrath? Oh, that's horrible. What an awful, awful picture of Christianity you paint. Well, I'm sorry, my friends, we didn't paint that. Paul did. If you don't like that, you don't like Paul. If you don't like Paul, you don't like the New Testament. If you don't like the New Testament, you don't like Christianity. Paul is setting forth here what is absolute bedrock Christian truth. The work of Christ on the cross is emphasized.

But notice also the work of God the Father is emphasized in this little phrase. Don't miss the picture. The picture is not of Jesus, the merciful one, trying to turn away the wrath of a mean, vindictive, narrow-minded, mean-spirited deity. No, look who it is who displays the Son. It's God who displays publicly His Son as a propitiation through His blood. The Father is the author of propitiation. The Father is the author of redemption. The Father is the author of justification. The Father's love is already upon His people. The cross is the means of accomplishing the purposes of His love. Jesus is not on the cross trying to get God the Father involved in salvation. He's on the cross because the Father has been involved in salvation from the beginning of the world, and He loves His people so much that He's willing to spare not His own Son.

But notice that the passage also emphasizes what Christ did. He was a propitiation. It's interesting. We don't use that word very often. You don't use justification very often, unless you're talking about justifying what you have done

to somebody or what you haven't done to somebody. We don't use redemption that much. We would normally talk about buying something, but we normally don't talk about redeeming anything, except maybe a coupon. And we don't use propitiation very much. But these words are very important. Redemption speaks of purchasing back something that was in bondage. A prisoner of war or a slave. Propitiation speaks of turning away a deserved wrath. Propitiation means a wrath-removing sacrifice.

Notice what this little phrase says. It says that Jesus was a 'wrath-removing sacrifice.' He was a sin offering who appeased God's just wrath and covered our sin. He turned away the wrath of God that should have been visited upon us. And this little phrase goes on to tell us one other thing. That the benefits of the provisions of grace in this passage provided for us in God's free justification are received how? Through faith. It is the one who believes on Jesus Christ, the one who has a personal belief and trust who receives the benefits of this redeeming work.

And so the gospel of free justification, as Paul unveils it here, forces us to acknowledge two things at the same time. It forces us to acknowledge that it's God the Father, Himself, who takes a loving grace initiative in our salvation. And at the same time it makes it clear that it is the righteousness and the justice of God that has to be dealt with and is dealt with in the death of Christ in order that we might receive free justification. The apostle is laying for us a beautiful picture and a beautiful explanation of why we can be confident of our salvation when we say we are trusting in Jesus Christ alone, as He's offered in the gospel. That's the first thing we see in this passage.

## **II. The gospel and free justification, rightly understood and taught, vindicate God's righteousness.**

But the second thing I'd like you to see. Look at the middle of verse 25. Just a little phrase, "This was to demonstrate His righteousness." In this little passage Paul is teaching us a second thing. That the gospel and free justification rightly understood, rightly taught, vindicate God's righteousness. And we've said all along it's a little surprising. You would think that the gospel would display or demonstrate God's mercy or His grace or His love. And all along we've said now Paul wouldn't have quibbled with that. Of course the gospel does. Of course it demonstrates God's mercy and grace and love. But Paul is emphasizing the fact that the gospel displays God's justice. How? That's a little strange to say, isn't it? Paul, having asked this question, 'How can free grace be right?' and having answered that question by saying, 'Because of divine blood atonement,' now makes an astounding assertion. He says that Christ's death, Christ's sin offering, Christ propitiation, Christ's sacrifice to turn away the wrath of God, demonstrates God's justice. It demonstrates God's righteousness.

Let me make an audacious statement. Let me make a bold statement. Listen closely. I'll repeat it twice. But listen closely. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system calls into question the justice and righteousness of God if there is no real divine sacrifice. Listen to that again. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system calls into question the justice and righteousness of God if there is no real divine sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ. Now how in the world can I say that? I can say that because the author of Hebrews, in Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 4 says this: "The blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sins." Now what was the whole atonement ritual of the Old Testament based upon? The sacrifice of bulls and goats and other animals. And yet the author of Hebrews says the blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sins. And he doesn't mean, well, the blood of bulls and goats can't forgive now in the New Testament, but it could in the Old Testament. He means it never could forgive sin. The blood of animals can't atone for human sin. They cannot bring about reconciliation. They can't bring about redemption. They can't bring about propitiation. And the propitiation offered by Christ that Paul is speaking about here demonstrates and vindicates the justice of God in establishing the Old Testament sacrificial system by providing a real sacrifice on which they are all based. So Paul's gospel actually reveals God's righteousness in showing that when He shows mercy, He doesn't just sweep sin under the carpet. He deals with sin by the death of His own Son, and those animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, they didn't forgive sin. They pointed forward to the One who was going to forgive sin.

### **III. Justification shows us how God's mercy is grounded in justice.**

Paul's not finished. There's a third thing that he shows here. Look at the end of verse 25, and the first few words of verse 26. "Because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed for the demonstration I say of His righteousness at the present time." Paul having made this audacious assertion that Christ's propitiation demonstrates God's righteousness, goes on to give a little bit further explanation about that. He tells us that God's past mercy, God's mercy to His people in the Old Testament, and even to some extent God's forbearance with the nations, that He didn't just end the world in His judgment, God's mercy in the past is grounded in His righteous judgment of Christ on the cross. Paul is saying something astounding here. Justification shows us how God's mercy is grounded in justice.

You know Paul was never in doubt about mercy. He was never in doubt about the mercy of God. You'll misunderstand Paul if you think that Paul conceived of the God of the Old Testament as unmerciful. That thought never entered into Paul's mind even when he was an unbeliever. He didn't think that the God of the Old Testament was merciful. He knew that the God of the Old Testament was merciful. What blew his mind about the gospel though was how God could be merciful and still be righteous at the same time. For Paul, God's mercy is axiomatic, but the wonder of His mercy, the wonder of God's mercy is that it is

just, and the gospel opened Paul's eyes to this. Apart from the gospel, you see, Paul says, the validity of the Old Testament sacrificial system is called into question. It's immoral for God to institute a system establishing atonement and reconciliation based on the sacrifice of animals. It's immoral because the blood, as he says in his own words, the blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sin.

I had a professor in Seminary who liked to speak evangelistically in various settings, and he would speak rather boldly. He was invited by a group of Christian businessmen who had a weekly luncheon in the city of St. Louis to come and give a presentation. They always asked the speakers to make the gospel presentation. He was told before he came that the group would be made up of Jews and Gentiles, ethnically and religiously speaking, and that some of the Jews were believing Jews. They believed on Christ. They were Messianic Jews, sometimes they are called; they were Christian Jews. And some of the Jewish men would not be Christians. And there would be some of the Gentiles who were there who were Christians and some of the Gentiles were not Christians. And he said, "Now you speak on anything you want." So he thought about this, and he was told by the man who invited him that, in fact, at that meeting, there would be a very large number of Jewish friends there. And so he decided, okay, I know what I'll talk about. And he titled his talk, "Moses the Great Barbarian." Now I'm sure that phrase was calculated to offend about half of the people there. That's a rather audacious kind of statement. I mean, Moses is the epitome of Jewish culture. He is the great prophet. He is the law giver. How dare you speak of Moses as the great barbarian. But this was his point. If Moses instituted a sacrificial system of animals that was conceived in and of itself to turn away the wrath of God, then Moses is no different than any naked savage in the wilderness who thinks that he can appease and placate and please the gods that he serves by the offering of animal sacrifices. No, the difference between Moses' sacrifices and the savage's sacrifice is simply this: That Moses' sacrifice is pointed forward to the true sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They were not in and of themselves able to or designed to forgive sins. But they did point forward to the one real sacrifice that does forgive sins. And that teaches us that Christ's cross-work flows both directions. It flows backwards in time, and it flows forward in time. It is Christ's cross-work which provides the covering for the sins of all those who were under God's covenant of grace in the Old Testament. And that's why it was just for God to be merciful to them, even though at that time in history no real sacrifice for sin had been provided. And so also it flows forward to us. We live 2000 years after His crucifixion, after His atoning work, and yet His benefits continue to flow forward. Justification shows us how God's mercy is grounded in justice and righteousness.

#### **IV. Justification compromises neither God's justice nor His mercy, but rather exalts them both.**

And then finally, if you look at the last words of verse 26, you see a fourth thing.

Paul here, having stated a question, 'how can God be just and freely graciously justified? and answered it, 'by divine blood atonement,' having made an assertion that God's propitiation, Christ's propitiation demonstrates God's righteousness, having explained that by showing the relationship between the sacrifices of the Old Testament and of the New, now gives us a conclusion.

God, he says, God is simultaneously a just judge and a merciful Father to those with faith in Christ. You see justification compromises neither God's justice nor His mercy, but exalts them both. Justification by faith compromises neither God's mercy nor His justice, but magnifies them both. Any presentation of the gospel that denies either of those two realities is, in fact, not the gospel. You hear a presentation of the gospel that denies that God is just, that presents Him as merely a loving and merciful Heavenly Father, it is certain that you have not heard the gospel. And, of course, the gospel can't be preached apart from the expression of God's compassion and mercy and love. And so both of those components must be present in a true presentation of the gospel. Here is the glory of the gospel, my friends. God shows Himself to be merciful. That is no surprise to anyone who knows the character of God. He is a God of patience and compassion.

But you see, when you say that God is merciful, you haven't said the gospel yet. The gospel is more than that. God is merciful. That is true. God is merciful to rebellious, hell-bound sinners. That is amazing. But you still haven't said all that the gospel is. God is merciful to rebellious, hell-bound sinners, and He saves them in such a way that His justice is not compromised. That's not only amazing, that's mind-boggling. But you still haven't said the gospel yet. God is merciful towards hell-bound sinners. He saves them in such a way that His justice is not compromised, and He does though at the expense of His own Son. That's past our knowledge. That's the gospel. The apostle Paul is saying in the gospel, I see the righteousness of God revealed in this way. The merciful God saves hell-bound sinners without compromising His justice by punishing His own Son. His Son who willingly takes their place, and receive upon His own body on the tree the due penalty for their sin. And offers to them salvation as they trust in Him. And you notice that emphasis there at the end of the verse. The one who has faith in Jesus. The provisions of grace, redemption, and propitiation, and justification and all those technical terms that Paul uses and piles up to describe the riches that we have in Jesus Christ. All of those things are appropriated by faith. And apart from faith they are not appropriated.

And that means, my friends, that it is only the one who has faith in Christ who can stand boldly on the judgment day. On the judgment day will you stand boldly? How will you stand? What kind of righteousness will you be dressed in? What will make you bold before the awesome, just judgment of God? Will you trust in Jesus Christ for salvation? If you do, why will you?

What is it about trusting in Jesus Christ that's so necessary? Why is it so



necessary? Why is that the way of salvation? The apostle Paul explains. God is righteous. He never compromises that righteousness, even as He displays His mercy. And so His mercy is displayed at the expense of His Son, and only toward those who embrace His Son by faith.

Now that presses on all of us an issue today. Have we trusted in Jesus Christ? Trusting in Jesus Christ isn't something that you do twenty-five years ago, and then you're kind of done with it, to move on, to do what you want. Free grace, you see, free grace is the gift that costs you everything. When you trust in Jesus Christ, you commit yourself to a new life. It's a life in which you recognize that your whole purpose is to glorify God by showing that He is worth living for in spite of all the aspersion of the demonic forces and of those who hate Him in this world. He becomes the focus of your life, the center of your life. Do you trust in Him? If you've never trusted in Him, if you've never placed Your trust and received Him as He's offered in the gospel, receive the Lord Jesus as he's offered in the gospel for your salvation, then you have nothing to say on that great day. You will stand before the throne; you will hear you missed the point; and there will be nothing that you can say.

But if you've trusted in Him, and if you will trust in Him on that great day you will stand, and in the gospel of His Son you will see God's mercy and justice displayed toward you and in you, and you will be bold even as the world crashes around your ears. And you'll rejoice as you see the saints of God vindicated, and as you see the enemies of God condemned. May God enable each of you to understand and to embrace the truth, and to walk with Him now and forever. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, it is in the gospel that You display Your glories, Your mercies, Your justice. We pray, oh Lord, that we would have some inkling of the beauty of the gospel ourselves, at least enough to know our need and to know the Savior, and to embrace Him by faith. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).