

## **Romans: Justification by Grace Through Faith (2)**

**Romans 3:21-26**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 3, verse 21. We'll look at this section of Romans one more time. We've been working our way through the whole gospel, and we've paused, and we have tarried for three weeks, breaking apart Romans 3:21 through 26 into three parts. And today I'd like to perhaps pull it back together, summarize, focus on especially some of the terms which are unfamiliar to us to make sure that they are absolutely certain in our mind. And then look at some of the implications of this glorious doctrine of justification by faith. As we do so, I want you to remember one thing in particular from our study of Romans 1:18 through 3:20. Paul has made it amply clear that we are without the righteousness that is necessary to stand before God to continue in a fulfilling relationship of enjoyment with Him to be acquitted on the last day. We lack that righteousness. In fact, we are in rebellion and sin against Him. We are under His condemnation. And Paul has piled up a whole array of words to describe our situation. We are without excuse. We are speechless before His judgment. We are sinful. We are condemned. We have been sentenced, and we are awaiting execution. All of that kind of language Paul piles up to describe our situation in relationship to God. Romans 3:21 through 26 is the antidote to that. Remember that as we come again to this great passage in God's word:

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, we ask for Your illumination that we might understand the truth of this word. We know that justification is at the very heart of our spiritual relationship with You. It's the foundation of so many other things in our salvation. We pray, O Lord, then that as believers we would understand this word, and that we would understand something of its implications for us. We pray as well, O Lord, that those who by Your Spirit are seeking You, that who have not yet trusted in Jesus Christ, that by Your spirit they, too, would see the truth of this word, and not see it in the abstract, but see it as it is for them. Embrace that truth to the saving of their souls. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Two things I want to try and do today. We have acknowledged all along as we worked through this passage that Paul stacks up a heap of words that we don't use in normal every day, breakfast table, over a cup of tea conversation. And I want to rehearse the meanings of those phrases and terms to make sure we have in our minds exactly what Paul is talking about. Because if we see exactly what Paul is talking about, we will be flooded with a vision of glory because this is amazing what he's telling us. Secondly, I simply want to recap for you the outline of Paul's argument in this passage, especially hitting three main truths which he focuses upon. Naturally, as we had opportunity to spend three weeks looking at this verse and taking it apart, we were able to focus on more things than that. But sometimes you lose the forest for the trees, and I'd like to pull back and look at the picture of two or three major things that Paul teaches us. Those are the only two things I'd like to do today. Let's begin with the words then.

### **I. The words Paul uses to describe the Good News are rich with meaning and comfort for those who take the time to study them.**

When you look at verses 21 through 26 you will see a number of terms which Paul uses related to justification which are mentioned in the passage. And these words which Paul uses to describe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ are rich with meaning and comfort for those who will take the time to study them. And I'd like to look at some of these lesser known words and phrases and think with you about them for a moment, especially focusing on these three: justification, redemption and propitiation.

But let me start back in verse 21, you'll a phrase there, the righteousness of God. What does that mean? We've already said that Paul has argued that we lack the necessary righteousness to stand before God, and then suddenly in verse 21, Paul says, "But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested." Now what is it exactly that Paul means when he says the righteousness of God has been manifested. What is he talking about when he says the righteousness of God? Well, let's remember that what God is and what He does is righteous. Both of those things are true. God is righteous, and He

does righteousness. God in and of Himself is upright. He is the ultimate, moral standard of the universe. There's not some standard outside God and above God by which He is judged. He Himself, in His own moral rectitude, is the standard of right and wrong in the universe, and He is just in His very nature. So He is righteous. Righteousness then is an attribute of God. That's one of the things that He is. But God also does righteousness, and He does righteousness in various way. Two immediately come to mind. God does righteousness when He punishes those who deserve to be punished. God does righteousness when he visits punishment upon those who reject His rule and His reign. So He is righteous in the exacting of justice.

But He's also righteous when He forgives those whom He promises to forgive. So God's righteousness is not only displayed in His justice, His righteousness is displayed in His mercy when He says to Abraham, "Trust in Me, and I will save you." And then He saves Abraham, and He fulfills His promises to Abraham. God is not only being merciful, He's being righteous. It would be unrighteous for God to renege on His word. And so when He keeps His word in fulfilling His gracious promises, He's displaying His righteousness. And Paul is telling us here that in the gospel God's righteousness is manifested. And think of it. In the gospel, God's righteousness is manifested in both of those ways. The gospel reveals, for instance, the truth that God will judge those who reject Him. The bad news always comes before the good news. Paul has spent two chapters telling us that apart from Christ everybody, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, religious or secular, moral or openly immoral, all apart from Christ are undone and will be judged by God. So the gospel begins with an announcement of God's judgment against sin. He's righteous.

But even within the good news of the gospel, there's a display of God's righteousness. For at the cross we see God's righteousness striking out against His Son in order to punish sin. So at the very heart of the gospel we see God's perfect purpose to punish sin. But we also see God's righteousness in mercy in the gospel. For the gospel is the fulfillment of all that God had promised Abraham. It's the thing which brings about the realization of the promises that He made to Abraham. In the gospel, God is faithful to be merciful to those whom He had promised mercy. And so God's righteousness is seen par excellence in the gospel.

But the amazing thing that Paul tells us here is that that righteousness can actually be received by you. You can receive that righteousness by faith, and so the term "the righteousness of God." It's used twice, once in verse 21 and again in verse 22.

But then there's another term in 22 that I want you to see. It's used in the form of a noun and of a verb. The noun faith, the verb believe. Notice how often Paul emphasizes our faith. It is made amply clear by Paul that faith is necessary for justification. I mean, there are some people, and I don't quite understand their

reasoning, but there are some people who seem to believe that all men are condemned and all men are justified, and that faith is not a condition of that justification. I've never quite understood that. It directly contradicts the teaching of Jesus who say, for instance, twenty times in the gospel of Matthew stressed to those to whom He ministered that their faith was a necessary part of their reception of His redeeming blessings. Paul makes that clear, too, doesn't he. "The righteousness of God through faith," verse 22. And just in case you forgot, "for all those who believe." He says it twice just to make sure you see how central faith is to receiving the righteousness of God. Faith is a necessity for justification.

But what is faith? What does it mean to believe. It means at least two things. To have faith is to believe God's word, especially His promise and to believe God Himself, especially His son, Jesus the Messiah. That is, faith has two components, belief and trust. Faith means believing God's word. That's trusting in what He says, the truth that He says, the doctrine that He says, the propositions that He gives us in the forms of words and sentences. But faith is also a personal trust, a leaning, a depending, a resting, a receiving based upon a personal relationship.

Now people constantly make a mistake by defining faith as one or the other, as opposed to both. Some people will say things like this. "Well, Christianity is a person, not a proposition." Or maybe they'll say it this way, "Christianity is not a person, not a doctrine." Paul would respond, "Wrong. It's both, it's both." Faith, which merely believes in ideas but does not have personal trust is not the saving faith which Paul is speaking about. But faith which says it is personal trust, but does not embrace the truths, the doctrines, the words of God is also not saving faith. Saving faith has both. Receipt of God's word, belief of God's word as well as a personal trust in God, and especially His Son, Jesus Christ.

In verse 23, we meet two other terms that are not terms that we use in very technical ways and regular conversation. The term sinned which we do use frequently, the words fall short which is not a term, in its technical sense, that we often use. To sin, our *Shorter Catechism* reminds us, means to break God's law by omission or commission. The *Catechism* says it much more eloquently, doesn't it? Sin is any want of conformity unto omission or transgression of commission the law of God. Now the *Catechism* is just ripping off John, because John, in I John says, "sin is lawlessness." And so the *Catechism* is just recognizing that there are two ways you can be lawless. You can fail to do what God tells you to do, or you can do that which God tells you not to do. You can omit to do its commands or you can commit a transgression against those commands. And in this passage Paul is using the term sin in that way. To sin is to break God's law by omission or commission, and thus fail the purpose of our creation. That's the effect of that phrase. Fall short. All have sinned. All have broken God's law and fallen short. We have failed the purpose for which we were created. We've missed the point. What's the point? To glorify God. To live for

God. To live for His glory. That's the point, but that's not all sin is.

Because sin is also the rupture of a relationship. In this case it's the rupture of the relationship that God created us for. He created us to be in everlasting companionship with Him, to be friends if I can put it that boldly. And sin is our rupturing of that relationship which God intended for us. And thus, when we sin we not only fail to glorify God, but we also fail to participate in the greatest blessing of life for which God made us companionship with Him which results in what? Enjoying God. To sin, then, is to fail to both glorify and to enjoy God, and thus it is to fail the purpose for which we were created.

What is the glory of God? That is a harder question than you might think. The short answer is that the glory of God is God Himself, because God is inherently worthy of praise. Notice how the Psalmist says it: "Give unto the Lord." He says to you, "Give unto the Lord the glory which is due His name." His name inherently is worth being praised. He is glorious in and of Himself. His essential worthiness to be praised is His glory. His weightiness, His fullness, His due, that is His glory. Ezekiel describes God's glory in Ezekiel, chapter 1. The Rabbis later would not allow young men under the age of thirty even to read the description, so awesome and mysterious is the glory of God.

What then, in verse 24, is grace? That's a term we throw around all the time. Sometimes we hear it explained in an acrostic that John Stott or maybe someone before him came up with. You've heard it, g-r-a-c-e. God's riches at Christ's expense. That's a good explanation of grace, and one could do much with that. But I want to be a little more specific than that. Oftentimes we say grace is 'unmerited favor.' That's true, but you know you can show someone favor that they didn't earn without their necessarily being a breach in your relationship with them. You can give a child a free gift where there is not necessarily a terrible breach in the relationship. Grace is the bestowal of favor, even in the face of a breach of relationship. So we need a more specific definition for it.

What is grace? Grace is God's free favor bestowed on those who deserve His condemnation at the cost of His Son. God's free favor bestowed on those who deserve His condemnation at the cost of His Son. That is grace. Notice it is free favor. There's nothing in us or about us that prompts that favor. God just loves us. It's bestowed on those who are not merely victims of sin, but on those who are perpetrators of sin. And it's done so not by God sweeping that sin under the carpet, but at the cost of His own son. As Derek Thomas described for us a couple of years ago, the gospel is not that God forgives. The gospel is that God forgives at the cost of His Son. And those two things are very different. You leave out the cost of the Son, you don't have the gospel. You don't understand grace. Mercy in the Bible is God's favor shown to us in our capacity as victims. We are all hurt by sin in this fallen world, but grace in the Bible is God's favor shown towards us, even as we are considered as rebels against Him and His will. And so he overwhelms our sin and draws us into His favor and into His kingdom.

Now, let's look at those three great words that I want you to concentrate on in these passages.

In verse 24 the word justified is used. What does it mean to be justified? Let me say before we say what it means, let me say emphatically what it does not mean. Just to be justified does not mean to be made righteous. This is so important for you to understand. To be justified does not mean to be made righteous, it means to be declared righteous. Do you remember when we were looking at that interesting passage both in Deuteronomy, chapter 25, that also in Proverbs 17? Turn with me there for a moment. Proverbs 17:15 says this: "He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord."

Now think about it for a minute, friends. If to justify or to be justified means to make righteous or to be made righteous, what would be wrong with someone making the wicked righteous? I mean if this passage means He who makes the wicked righteous is an abomination to the Lord, it wouldn't make very much sense would it? But if this passage means that the judge who accounts or declares to be righteous the wicked or declares to be wicked and condemns the righteous is an abomination of the Lord? It makes sense.

This term as well as the term used in Deuteronomy, chapter 25, indicate that Paul uses the term justification in a legal sense. It means to be declared righteous in a court of law, to be counted or treated as righteous. And so we are accepted by God, not by our being made acceptable, but by this great exchange whereby we are accepted on account of Jesus Christ and His righteousness. He is righteous, we are not. We are declared righteous because of Him. That is justification.

Let's look at the word redemption. This is a precious word, too, in verse 24. Paul says that we are justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. To be redeemed is to be set free by the payment of a price. We said that in Paul's day you could have seen living illustrations of this in at least a couple of ways. Have you been in the slave market? You could have seen people who purchased a slave out of slavery and set that person free by the payment of a price. It's a commercial transaction. You could also have seen it when a king or a group of leaders purchased prisoners of war out of their confinement from their enemies by the payment of a ransom or a price. This was an illustration which would have resonated with the people to whom Paul was speaking. And so for us to be redeemed is to be set free by the payment of a price.

And then finally in verse 25, this word propitiation. Again, not a term that we use very regularly. What does propitiation mean? Propitiation, or a propitiation, means a sacrifice that turns away wrath. It is a sacrifice that appeases God's just indignation and covers our sin. Now those three words are particularly precious

to the Christian, and I think you should ponder them for a while.

But they are also very important for the unbeliever. Think of them for a moment. Justification, redemption and propitiation. Now Paul has already told you from Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20 three things about us as sinners. First of all he has told us that as sinners we are condemned as guilty. Secondly, he has told us as sinners we are sold into bondage into sin. And thirdly, he has told us that as sinners we simply are awaiting the final visitation of the wrath of God, because as sinners, facing God apart from Christ there is nothing to stand in between us and the just visitation of God's wrath. Now think about those three precious words. Justification, redemption and propitiation.

Justification answers the problem of our being guilty and condemned as such by pronouncing us not guilty. Think about that, Christian. The next time you are wrestling with the sin with which you struggle, and you are feeling the weight of its guilt, and you are wondering if God will accept you, and you reflect upon your faith in Christ, remember this. That in Christ you are declared not guilty. The next time the accuser whispers in your ear, but if you've sinned you've lost your salvation. Reflect upon the truth of justification, not guilty. The truth of justification is not made perfect, made perfectly righteous. The truth of justification is declared righteous, no condemnation. Now I dread. Think about that. An unbeliever, as you struggle with your guilty conscience, knowing that you ought to be condemned in those fleeting moments of honesty when you can face yourself in the mirror and acknowledge what you are. Remember that you indeed ought to be condemned. But there is a free justification provided in Jesus Christ. Justification answers the problem of our condemnation for guilt of sin.

But redemption does something else. You remember in that frightening passage in Romans, chapter 1 where Paul says that if the Gentiles who sin and who rebel against him and worship the creature rather than the Creator, three times he says what? God gave them over. God gave them over. God gave them over. He let them do exactly what they wanted to do. He sold them into the bondage of their own sin. Now what does redemption do? In redemption, Jesus buys us back out from under the bondage to sin into which we had sold ourselves. And He does it not by paying a price other than Himself, but by paying the price of Himself. Now you think about that, believer, as you struggle with that sin that you don't seem to be able to shake. And you feel like you are powerless before it. You remember that your Savior sold Himself as the price of the redemption of you from the bondage of sin, so that sin shall no longer have dominion over you, because you have a new Master.

Then think about that glorious word propitiation. You remember in Romans 1 and 2 Paul says all we have is the anticipation of the visitation of the wrath of God, for we have no excuse, we have no argument against it. All we can anticipate is God's perfect penal wrath being visited upon us. But here's propitiation. And in propitiation, the Lord Jesus Christ in His sacrifice on the cross appeases, He

quits, He satisfies the wrath of God so that not one sin is unatoned for, for the one who believes in Jesus Christ. So that we stand before God knowing that God's wrath has been poured out to the full in Jesus Christ. It is not that God cancels those sins, He liquidates them. It is not that He sweeps those sins under the carpet, He visits the penalty and the condemnation of that sin on the person of Jesus Christ so that that penalty and condemnation has been swallowed up in Christ. It doesn't exist any more for us.

Do you see the freedom that that brings to the Christian life? For the unbeliever, do you see the glorious offering of the gospel that Paul is setting forth before you. You struggle with guilt, I've got justification. You're bound to your addictions, I've got redemption. You're afraid of the wrath of God, you ought to be, but I've got propitiation. That's what is freely offered to you. Embrace Christ and you have it all. You see why it's so important for us to learn these wonderful words. Jim Phillip is surely exactly right when he says, "It is not too much to say that a true estimate of the New Testament gospel depends upon a proper interpretation of the words righteousness, propitiation, justification, redemption and faith. You see how much encouragement there is in these words.

## **II. Paul tells us three eternally significant truths.**

And then finally and very briefly let me just say this. As you look at the big picture of what Paul does in verses 21 through 26 you see Paul telling you three eternally significant truths. The first one is this: There is a righteousness that is provided by grace. You lack righteousness? He's argued that for two chapters. That righteousness is provided as a gift by God. You don't produce it, you contribute nothing to it. It is created outside of you, it is a divine righteousness, it's offered to you, it's provided to you. It's provided for you by grace.

The second great truth is this, and you see it. Our purchase, our redemption is based upon a divine blood sacrifice. Do you see how God's mercy and His justice are so beautifully joined here? God freely forgives, but He forgives in such a way that the basis of our security and our salvation is the blood atonement of His son. The blood sacrifice of His son. The divine offering of His Son. Do you see how that gives you security? When you stand before the Lord on the Judgment Day, your plea is not "Oh Lord, you've made me a better man." When you stand before the Lord on your Judgment Day, your plea is not, "Well, I'm basically a good person." Your plea before the Lord on the Judgment Day is not, "Well, I've tried to live a good life." Your plea before the Lord on the Judgment Day is simply this. Christ, in my place, He is my righteousness. My redemption is purchased by His blood sacrifice. Turn to 499 right quickly. We're about to sing it. Look what Augustus Toplady says when he's contemplating meeting his God before the throne in eternity. Stanza 4, "While I draw this fleeting breath." Here he is at the gates of death. "When mine eyelids close in death, when I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne." What's his plea? "Rock of Ages



cleft for me." Even in glory he doesn't say, "Lord, accept me because You've transformed me? Lord accept me because You have justified me by the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

And that's the last thing that Paul teaches. That benefit, the benefit of God's righteousness, provided by grace is received by faith. So that when you say and when you mean, "Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee," then you become the recipient of an alien righteousness which you contributed nothing to, but which restores you to what you were created for, to glorify and enjoy God forever. Let's pray.

Our Lord, we fall short of the glory of Your word in our understanding. But Your truth is so manifest that no opened eye can miss it. So help us to embrace it and to live it. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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