

## **Romans: Justification by Grace Through Faith**

**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, beginning in verse 21. Just to remind you of a couple of things before we look at this great passage today. We're going to focus on the very end of verse 22, and then verses 23 and 24. But Paul, for more than two chapters, has been telling us the bad news. We've said over and over and Romans 1 makes it clear that the Gentiles are under bondage to the law and to the condemnation of God, and they need redemption according to God provided to them freely. They can't save themselves.

But in Romans, chapter 2, he goes on to make it very clear that the Jews, too, apart from Christ stand in need of redemption. Now there's a message for us today. That not only is a message for pagans, those who are apart from religious belief or church involvement, those who have no Christian profession of faith, yes, of course, this passage speaks directly to them. They stand in need of God's justifying mercy. But it also speaks to religious people who have no real trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. There can be much religious activity. There can be involvement in a body of believing people. There can be church membership and other things like that, and yet a person may in fact not have real trust in Christ. And Paul is speaking both to pagans and to religious people who are apart from a real trust in Jesus Christ, and he's saying this. "I have bad news for you. Apart from Christ there is condemnation for sin, and you are under that condemnation." And he spends two full chapters speaking about this condemnation, because before we can understand the good news, we must understand the bad news. So over and over he stresses the needs for God's provision of salvation which everyone, without distinction, stands in need of.

And then secondly, I'd like to remind you what we did last week as we looked through those first two verses, or really part of the first two verses of this passage. We focused on four or five things that Paul teaches us about the gospel there. Look at the phrase, "But now." He opens this section with "But now," teaching us that the gospel displays a distinction between what we were before Christ, apart from Christ, what we are in Christ after saving belief in Christ. Condemnation before, blessing and acceptance and justification afterwards. It

also, of course, that "But now" speaks to the distinction between what God had been doing historically amongst his people before the time of the coming of Christ in preparation for that time, and what God was now doing since Christ has come since now in the fullness of time, God has sent His son to be a propitiation for sin. We live in an age which is uniquely a gospel age. And that "But now" displays that distinction in the gospel. The distinction between what we were before and after Christ as well as between the old covenant and the new covenant.

Secondly, look at the phrase "apart from the law" in Romans 3:21. Paul teaches us there that the gospel amazingly displays God's righteousness apart from our obedience. God's righteousness in the gospel is displayed not by our obedience, not by our law works, but in another way. God's righteousness is displayed. That was a surprising thing we saw. Thirdly, in that phrase "the righteousness of God" has been manifested. And then again in the phrase, "Even the righteousness of God through faith," Paul told us something again that was surprising about the gospel. That the gospel is fundamentally about the displaying of the righteousness of God. We might have said well the gospel is about showing the grace of God or the mercy of God or the loving kindness of the Lord. And all those things would have been true, but Paul here is focusing us on the truth that the gospel is about the righteousness of God. In the gospel His righteousness is manifest even as He displays His mercy.

Then again, look at that interesting phrase "being witnessed by the law and the prophets." In that little phrase Paul is telling you that the gospel is not uniquely something that pertains to the New Testament. There wasn't, in other words, another way of salvation under the Old Testament. When he speaks of the gospel, notice what he says. It was witnessed to by the law and the prophets. In other words, the whole of the Old Testament bears witness to the way of salvation revealed in the gospel. So there is continuity between what God was doing then, and what God is doing now. The way of salvation is the same.

And then finally in that phrase, "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe," we see that God has ordained that His righteousness would be received by the means of faith. That is, through belief and trust on Jesus Christ, God would bestow the righteousness of the gospel. And so these things are all things that we saw as we reviewed Paul's first two statements in this passage that pertains to the gospel.

This is a great passage. Paul packs it full of thought. Every word, every phrase has tremendous meaning. Remember that throughout as we studied this last week, we said that Paul has been pressing upon us an ultimate question, what stands a man before God? What makes a man right before God? On the last day what could possibly make a human being able to stand boldly before the throne of a God who is perfectly righteous. What will you be dressed in on the last day? How are you going to be able to be bold and confident on the judgment day?

That cluster of questions which is really just one question, Paul constantly has on his mind, and he's pressing it home on us as we read through this passage. So bear that in mind throughout. Let's hear God's holy word beginning in verse 21: Romans 3, beginning in verse 21. This is 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 Jesus Christ, 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, these words are glorious and they are so surprising. They are filled with such gospel, joy and awe. They overwhelm us, and we need the help of your Holy Spirit to understand them. We pray that by Your Holy Spirit You would open our eyes. If we come today skeptical, if we come in any way unbelieving, not trusting with the whole of our heart alone upon Jesus Christ alone, we pray that You would shake us from our spiritual slumber, that You would show us our sin, and that You would show us the Savior. We come as believers today, but struggling, struggling for the assurance of Your purposes in our lives, struggling with our assurance of salvation. We pray that You would, by the very ministry of Your words, strengthen our hearts and make us glad in our salvation. We pray, O God, that all the praise would be Yours, that You would enable us to open our eyes, to behold, to understand, to see, to hear and to embrace. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Everybody needs to know about justification by faith. If you have been a believer for thirty years, forty years, fifty years and you're here today, you need to know about justification by faith. I understand that if you're a believer you know something about justification by faith. A believer's assurance to a large degree is tied to how well that believer understands justification by faith. You know if you know yourself very well at all, you know your sin. And if you know your sin very well at all, you know that it can be a nagging thing, and if you don't understand the freeness and completeness and the effectiveness of justification by faith, you will continue to be weighed down and nagged by your sin. Every believer delights to hear about the doctrine of justification by faith. You know you don't get finished with the doctrine of justification by faith. You don't become a believer and sort of shelve that one and move on to more important stuff. No, it's the doctrine of

justification over and over that enables us to grow in the Christian life. Faith itself is that grand instrument for the Holy Spirit for growth in grace. So justification by faith is a doctrine that every true believer loves to hear about and loves to know more of. In fact, I would go so far to say that if your heart does not thrill to know more about the free justification of God by the redemption of His Son, you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ. Because anyone who knows the Lord Jesus Christ wants to know of how freely He has given us salvation.

But the doctrine of justification by faith is something that everybody needs to know about. Not just believers, unbelievers. Those who are without a real saving faith in Jesus Christ. Unbelievers need to hear about the doctrine of justification by faith as well. For without understanding the doctrine of justification, you are without hope, you are without salvation. As we ask that question what stands a man before God? There's only one answer. And that one answer comes in what the Bible teaches about justification. So there is no issue which a person who has no real saving faith in Christ needs to think about more than the issue of how a man is made just before God. How a man is declared righteous before God. How a man is accepted before God. How a man is pardoned before God. Justification speaks of all those things, and I'd like again to focus your attention on the end of verse 22, and then down to verse 23 and 24. We'll just look at three of four things that Paul says.

### **I. Everybody needs justification.**

The very first thing that Paul says in this passage is a phrase that we didn't concentrate on, even though we studied verse 22. It's a phrase right at the end of that verse. For there is no distinction. And in that little phrase Paul teaches you the first thing you need to know about justification from this passage today. And that is that everybody needs justification. There is no distinction.

What is Paul saying? There is no distinction between sinners apart from Christ. If you're apart from Christ, it doesn't matter whatever else is different about you from everybody else in the world. The one thing that matters with regard to salvation, the one thing that matters salvificly, the one thing that matters is that you are apart from Christ. And therefore no matter how different you are from other sinners, from other groups, you are in the same fix that all sinners apart from Christ are in. You are under the condemnation of God. You may be rich, but apart from Christ you are under the condemnation of God. You may be poor, but apart from Christ you are under the condemnation of God. You may have been raised, you may be been reared in a very socially adroit kind of setting. You may have been reared with tremendous educational opportunities. You may be very influential in your community. Or you may be poor, you may never have had the opportunity for education. You may come from a background where you were on the wrong side of the tracks. None of those distinctions ultimately will matter. On the last day, the only thing that matters is that you are either in Christ or apart

from Him, then you stand before God and the question is asked.

What stands a man before God? What makes a man acceptable to God? If you're apart from Christ, that is the one thing that matters. There is no distinction. When the passenger's list began to be put up in New York of the people who had survived the sinking of the Titanic, and those who had not survived the sinking of the Titanic. All the other distinctions in their lives were lost. There were only two categories: Those who were saved, and those who were lost. On the last day, that's the only distinction that will matter. There is no other distinction. And even though you were a religious person and even though you went to church very often, but you never trusted in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, all the other distinctions will not matter. And so Paul presses this matter home, because the first point of salvation is recognizing your need. And if you don't think that you need to be justified, if you don't think that you need to be declared righteous before God, it is certain that you are lost. If you don't think that you need justification, it is certain that you are not justified. If you don't think that you need justification, it is certain that you have never understood in such a way to embrace the gospel itself. And so you were the very person who needs to listen about it.

## **II. Justification answers the predicament of sin.**

But secondly, Paul goes on, notice in verse 23 to tell us this. "Justification is God's answer to our predicament of sin." The nature of the problem of sin is stated again. Paul tells us here, "We have sinned, and we are continuously falling short of the glory of God." Now Paul has spent two chapters telling us this. He's even been arguing with us a little bit about it, because he knows that some people want to argue back about this particular status. And so he pauses to tell us one more time, just to make sure. Do we understand what the problem is? Do we understand what our predicament is? And he's telling us, "Look, justification is God's answer to that predicament." What is our predicament? We are sinners. We have sinned. We fall short of the glory of God. We've missed the mark, we have broken God's law through not being conformed to it, not obeying its positive commands through absolutely transgressing its prohibitions. We have fallen short of the glory of God.

How do you even explain or describe the strong words that Paul uses here to characterize sin? You know, missing the mark or falling short of the glory of God might sound like, "Ooh, I almost made it." Real close, you know, just a few more inches, and I will have gotten across that line. If the arrow had been just a little bit closer to the bull's eye, I would have gotten it. But that's not what Paul is saying at all. I ransacked my mind over the last few days thinking how do you illustrate this. And a couple of those horrible experiences from past life came to mind. One was sitting in an English class at University, and the professor would regularly call upon members of the class to explain to him what a poem meant or what a

short story meant or what a book meant that we had been assigned to read. And then after you had given him your analysis of the book, he would brutally, brutally criticize your analysis of the book. On one particular day he asked a person in the class to tell him what a particular Robert Frost poem meant. I still shudder when I remember that exchange. The person had clearly studied and went into great detail about the meaning of this particular poem and the various aspects of it and the illusions and the various devices that Robert Frost had deployed. And at the end of this explanation, Dr. Bates said, "You missed the point," and I remember wanting to just crawl under my chair for that person. Everything that he had said was wrong. He missed the whole point of a poem. I had another flashback because a few years later I was in a preaching class in seminary, and a friend of mine had just preached his heart out on a text assigned by the minister who was teaching the class. And after the class was over, and we were to give our various input on the sermon, we were all trying to encourage this friend along. Always at the end of our comments and evaluations the teacher of the class would make his comments, and once again he came up and he said, "Now this is a very interesting text. And it was a very interesting presentation, but I want to make one thing very clear. You missed the entire point of the passage." You can't imagine how discouraging that is to a young minister to hear that word. "You missed the entire point." Well, it struck me. This is what Paul is saying, "That at the end of life standing before God almighty, the verdict on our life will be you missed the whole point." You see it's not that you almost made it. It was real close, ninety-eight percent. You missed the whole point. That's what Paul is saying. That's the verdict on the sinner. You have missed the whole point for which I made you. I made you to experience companionship with me, to share my glory. You failed to receive that glory, you failed to glorify me, you failed to reflect my glory. You missed the whole point of life. That's what Paul is saying. Apart from Christ the verdict of God against every individual is going to be "you missed the point." It's not that we got sixty-eight percent of it, or ninety-six percent of it, or ninety-eight percent of it. We missed the whole point. We were on the wrong tract, and it's right in the context of that frightening verdict that Paul has such good news for us.

### **III. Justification is absolutely free.**

And he begins to tell you that good news again in verse 24 because he says that those sinners who have missed the point, they've missed the whole point. And yet those who have thrown themselves upon the mercy of Christ believing in Him alone for salvation, they have found that God has accepted them and declared them to be righteous freely as a gift. Justification, in other words, Paul says, is a grace gift; and it is a grace gift that comes from the extravagantly, loving hands of the heavenly Father. Justification, in other words, is absolutely free. We contribute absolutely nothing to this declaration of God. Justification means the pronouncing or a declaring of a person to be righteous. It's a law court term. Moses uses it in Deuteronomy 25, verse 1 to contrast with a judge condemning

someone. The judge justifies or acquits someone who is innocent. He condemns someone who is guilty. But in this justification, someone who ought to be condemned is acquitted by God.

Justification is an act, it's not an ongoing work or process. It's a judicial act, and it's not our act. God justifies. We don't justify ourselves. In justification, God pardons us. He forgives us of our sin. He spares us the penalty of that sin. The only thing in our culture that comes remotely close is a presidential pardon. And when the presidential pardon comes down no one can ever again convict you for whatever crime you have committed. No one can bring to bear on you the judicial punishment for that particular crime. When the presidential pardon comes down it is absolute within this particular culture. You are freed. God, in justification as a gift, to a divine act of grace pardons us. He spares us the penalty that was due our sin. And that free justification flows from the heart of a father to all who trust in His Son. And it is given to them without price. It is freely offered. No wonder one of Erskines, when he was preaching a sermon on the story of the prodigal son, called the story not the prodigal son but the story of the free-grace Father. God, despite our sin, in justification because and insofar as by His Holy Spirit we have trusted ourselves and committed ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, God freely justifies us by His redemption.

And then Paul in the second half of verse 24 goes on to say one more thing. Notice the phrase "through the redemption" which is in Jesus Christ. Justification, in other words, justification, though it's free, is, in fact, very costly. Justification is free to us, but it's costly to God. Justification is only made possible through an exorbitant expense through an extravagant purchase. Justification is free, but it is unimaginably costly. Paul says that it is extended to us as a gift by grace but it is purchased for us through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has paid a purchase price for us. Jesus Christ has paid by His life and by His blood, by His bearing the penalty of sin, a purchase price.

Redemption is a term that was oftentimes used to refer to people buying slaves in the slave market. They would redeem a slave. They would buy that slave. Sometimes they would set that slave free. Other times redemption was used to refer to buying prisoners out of being prisoners of war; redeeming them out of their bondage. And Paul is saying here that we are justified freely, but that free justification is done on the basis of Jesus paying a purchase price for sinners.

Now those two ideas may seem not to go together. Well, how can it be that justification be free and justification is costly? How can it be that justification can be a gift and at the same time justification is earned? How can those things go together? Now it's interesting – the reformers beautifully emphasized both of those truths, that justification is free, and justification is costly. Justification cannot be earned, we contribute nothing to it. It's something that God does. It's something that He does not on the basis of anything in us, He does it out of His love, and His grace and His mercy.

The reformers preached that beautifully. They also preached beautifully the fact that justification is costly. It's costly to God. It cost the blood of His only begotten Son. Our justification was earned, as it were, by the Lord Jesus Christ. And the reformers stressed both of those things. But there were people who objected to their teaching. One man who objected to that teaching was a man named Socinus. In fact he specifically objected to John Calvin in his teaching on justification, and he said, "Look, justification is either free, that is, that God either freely forgives without condition, or justification is based upon an atonement, a price, a sacrifice. But it can't be both," Socinus said. It's either free, God just freely forgives, he sweeps it under the carpet, or justification is based upon the atoning, appeasing death of Christ.

Now Socinus went on to say: "And I believe that justification is free; therefore, I reject the idea that justification is based upon the atoning work of Christ because that's contradictory. You can't have it both ways. It's either free or it's not. It's either a gift or it's earned."

And John Calvin responded, "You have totally misunderstood Paul in the Scriptures. For though justification is free to us, and we receive it without cost, and it comes to us not because of something in us that prompts God to love us; but it flows out of the love of the Heavenly Father. It comes to us at a tremendous cost, not to ourselves, but to the Son of God. For He Himself bore the penalty of our sin; and He Himself received the verdict of guilty, though he was not, in order that we might receive the verdict not guilty."

In other words, in the heart of God every time He extends to a sinner the verdict of free justification, 'you are not guilty,' there is in the heart of God the corresponding remembrance of His verdict upon His own Son. So that when He freely and without price pronounces you accepted and acquitted and pardoned and safe, He remembers His verdict upon His Son that He was rejected and condemned and sentenced, and He paid the penalty. And thus justification is both free and costly, freely extended, flowing from the heart of love, and yet the medium through which that grace flows, the ground on which God can be righteous and merciful at the same time is the death of His beloved Son.

And do you see because of that why no one can be justified apart from belief in the Lord Jesus Christ? No one can be saved; no one can experience the free justification of God around the back of the Lord Jesus Christ, apart from trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. If we do not trust in Him, if we do not worship Him, the one who paid the price of our justification, how can we ever expect to know the freeness of justification. The blessing of justification, the saving of justification.

And so the apostle in this passage teaches us that every one needs justification, and that justification is an answer to our predicament of sin, and that justification is absolutely free, and that it is unimaginably costly. And then He presses this



home. When you stand before God, what will you say? Why am I able to stand before you this day? If your answer begins with "I," you're wrong. The answer begins with Christ, because justification begins with God. And knowing that and believing and embracing that is the beginning of an adventure that will last forever. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, on that last day enable us all by grace to say Thy works, not mine, O Christ. Amen.

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