

**Romans:  
The Righteousness Which Comes  
by Faith (1)**

**Romans 3:21-31**

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

If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 3, verse 21 as we continue our study through this great book. Paul has spent the last two or more chapters making it very clear that all the world stands guilty before God. He has done this because if we do not understand, if we do not embrace the truth of the bad news, the good news makes no sense. It not only makes no sense, we can't appropriate it unless we accept the reality about ourselves as Paul has described it in Romans 1 and 2 and the beginning of Romans 3, the we are not prepared to embrace the grace which is offered in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why Paul has been driving that note home with such remorseless endeavor. Over and over and over he stresses that both Jew and Gentile apart from Christ stand under the condemnation of God.

And then having said that, he poses to us this question. What stands a man then before God. What are you going to be dressed in as you stand before God? In fact, as we begin to walk through this whole section from Romans 3:21-31, I'd like you to hold a basic question in your mind. That question is this, standing before God on judgment day, knowing that you are a person who has been far from perfect, what is going to make you bold? We just sang about being bold on that judgment day. What is going to make you bold to stand before the all-seeing, the all-discerning righteous God of the universe?

I want you to pause and think for a moment. Almost all of us have hidden sins that would be extremely embarrassing to us were they revealed, even to those closest to us, much less before the congregation. And those sins are known before God, thinking of those hidden sins, would you hide right now which no one else know about. Serious? Some, apparently less heinous. What is going to make you bold before God, knowing that He knows those sins perfectly in the day of His judgment? What about those things for which we have been confronted by those closest to us? Rebuked, perhaps. Those rebukes which we feel deeply because we know that they strike at a truth about us which we don't particularly want to think about. A reality, a habit, a sin which is displeasing to God and hurtful to our neighbor. How are we going to stand before God on that last day? Boldly, knowing those realities and knowing that He knows those realities. Even those things for which we feel we are falsely accused of by

someone close to us. We know the consternation of sometimes being falsely accused, and at the same time knowing that there is a grain of truth in this false accusation. How are we going to stand boldly before God knowing that those realities, and by the way, the reality of guilt, which is ours, is far greater than just the realities of our awareness of it. We're just talking about things that we're aware of. That we become aware of reluctantly, perhaps. The reality of that guilt is far greater. How are we going to stand boldly before God on the judgment day with that reality about us?

Some people want to cope with denial. We are basically good people. God will let us off the hook. We're basically good people. Paul says if that's your answer, you're in trouble. And if that's your answer, you're not even prepared to hear my gospel, because it's only the person who realizes Paul, what you're saying is true about me. I do deserve condemnation and judgment. It's only that person who is even ready to hear the greatness of the good news which he is going to unfold.

So what stands you before God? What are you going to be dressed in before God? How are you going to stand boldly, knowing what you know about yourself before the God who knows everything about yourself on that last day? Those are the kinds of issues that Paul is going to begin to deal with in this great passage today. So let's hear God's holy 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 and our God, there's nothing more important for us to understand in this life than the gospel. And so we pray that by Your Spirit in the next few moments You might give us an understanding and an embrace of gospel truth to the saving of our souls, and to Your glory. In Jesus' name, we ask it, Amen.

Paul, in this little passage, sums up the argument that He has been laying the groundwork for throughout this epistle. In fact, he takes us in Romans 3:21 right back to a thought that he had given us in Romans 1:17. I'd invite you turn back there. In Romans 1:17 he said that the gospel was the power of God unto

salvation, and he went on to say, "For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed." Well, notice where he picks up in Romans 3:21: "But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested." He's right back to that point.

From Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20 he's been explaining to us why we need this righteousness of God that has been manifested in the gospel. If we don't know that, or if we don't believe that we need the gospel, then what Paul says from now on is nothing more than gobble de gook. It makes no sense to us. But if we have been struck with the reality of what Paul has been saying about not only certain individuals, but everyone standing in need of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, then what Paul is about to say is the greatest news that has ever been heard. But there's no way that we can possibly cover everything adequately in Romans 3:21 through 26 today. There was one commentator who, having done the exposition of the first three chapters, came to Romans 3:21 and to the words "But now," and into this section of the gospel and preached twenty-two sermons on it. I'm not going to subject you to that. But I had planned about three so that we could take our time. And I'm not even sure whether we can do it in three, but that's what I'm sort of aiming at. And what I'd like to do with you this morning is concentrate just on the first two verses and not even the whole of verse 22.

So we're going to look at verses 21 and 22 of Romans, chapter 3, and see Paul continue this legal judicial courtroom forensic language that he's been using. He's been talking about us being guilty, he's been talking about us being on trial and being sentenced and being condemned. And now he's going to say something absolutely amazing. That God the Judge acquits sinners. He acquits those who are guilty because of His infinite love based upon the law work of His Son in His life and death, freely pardoning us as we place our trust, our faith, in Jesus who is the Messiah. But Paul is excited about the fact that God does this in such a way that not only is His own justice and righteousness not compromised, but in fact it is highlighted and exalted in such a way that He shows His grace to us. And in the showing of His grace, He actually emphasizes the perfection of His righteousness.

This is what boggles Paul's mind. Paul is not surprised that the God of the Scriptures is gracious. Paul is not surprised by that at all. Although that is an incredibly surprising truth when we contemplate who we are in the receipt of His grace. But Paul is amazed, he's overwhelmed that the God of grace shows His grace and bestows His grace in such a way that His justice is not compromised. You remember in Proverbs 17 God Himself had said, "Cursed is the judge who condemns the innocent and who acquits the guilty." The apostle Paul is about to tell us about God, the Judge, who acquits the guilty. And the question occurs to us, how can God, the Judge, condemn human judges who acquit the guilty and yet acquit the guilty Himself? And that's what gets Paul so excited about the gospel. Because in the gospel, God's justice and His righteousness and His grace and His mercy are all displayed side by side, far from contradicting one

another. In fact, enhancing our understanding of one another. So if you don't believe that God is just, you can never understand His grace. And if you don't believe that God is gracious, you can never understand this display of His justice. And so in this passage, I'd like us to see four or five things, just in these first two verses. The first thing is this.

### **1. The gospel displays an inherent distinction between what we are in Christ, before union with Him and after.**

Paul, in Romans 3:21, makes it clear that the gospel displays an inherent distinction between what we are before Christ, before union with Him, before trust in Him, and after. And, it displays the distinction between the old and the new covenant. Look at that little phrase in verse 21, "But now." Paul deplores "but now" as both a temporal distinction between what God had been doing in preparation for the fullness of times in the days of the old covenant, and the fulfillment of those promises and those prophecies and those types in the old covenant. You remember where Paul – the center point of history is Jesus Christ in His incarnation, in His life, in His death, in His resurrection and ascension. That's the center point of history. Everything before it was then. Everything after it is 'now.' That's the center point of history for Paul. And Paul's "but now" even points to that. Now we have come to the fullness of times. That's how he says it in Galatians 4:4. "In the fullness of time, God sent His Son." And so that "but now" refers to that temporal distinction, but more than that it refers to that logical distinction between our plight which he's been talking about and God's salvation. Our plight and God's provision.

Paul, for two chapters or more, really from Romans 1:18 all the way to Romans 3:20, has been talking about the fix that we are in. We are sinful. We know we are sinful. We are guilty. We deserve condemnation, and now he's going to show us what we get from God in His grace and mercy as we trust in Christ, despite that situation that he's been talking about in Romans 1, 2 and 3. And so there's a contrast here between our plight and God's provision. And the gospel displays this before and after reality. And that's one reason, friends, why if we reject the bad news, we can't accept the good news. You see, a person who thinks that there is no original sin, and that all people are basically good cannot even begin to understand what Paul is talking about in the good news of the gospel. If you believe that we are not in a state of deserving condemnation, in a state of wicked rebellion against God, the gospel is absolutely unintelligible, and that's why Paul says, but now here's where you are, here's what you deserve. But now here is God's gracious gospel answer to it. And so if we reject our deserving of condemnation with it, we also reject salvation. Because salvation, Jesus said, is not for the righteous, it's for sinners. *God saves sinners* is a beautiful three-word, nutshell of the gospel. But notice the word is sinners. It's not just people, it's sinners that God saves. And those people who want to exempt themselves from the category of being sinners are not in the category for which God has

presented the gospel. And so the gospel displays the distinction between what we were before and after our union with Christ.

Secondly, I'd like you to see again in Romans 3:21, that the gospel amazingly displays God's righteousness apart from our obedience of God's law. The gospel displays the righteousness of God apart from our law work, apart from our obedience to God's express commands. Notice this phrase, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law." Apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested. Paul is explaining to us in this little phrase, "apart from the law" that God's righteousness has been made manifest wholly apart from our doing, from our obedience, from our law work. Paul is exposing the inherent legalism that results from separating the law of God from the promise of God and from the fulfillment of that promise in Christ. Paul is saying that God's righteousness is going to be displayed in us in such a way that nothing that we do contributes to that display of God's righteousness. There is absolutely nothing accessory or subsidiary or contributory to this display of God's righteousness that we bring. It is an alien righteousness. It is a righteousness of God, provided by God, received by faith. It is not something in us.

Again, we're back to that question. What stands you before God? On the last day, if it is anything in you that stands you before God that you're trusting in, what are you going to do with the other realities in you that you really don't want to think about right now. Unless it is a righteousness outside of you that stands you before God, you will not boldly stand before the throne of grace. The apostle Paul is telling us here that the gospel displays God's righteousness apart from our law work.

Thirdly, again in verse 21, notice what Paul says: "The righteousness of God has been manifested. Even the righteousness of God through faith." He goes on to say in verse 22. The gospel, surprisingly, is fundamentally a demonstration of God's righteousness and justice in the midst of His mercy. Now that's surprising, because if you and I were describing the gospel, we would use words like this: Grace, mercy, love and all of those would be appropriate and all of those would be right. But that's not what Paul is focusing on right now. He is focusing us on God's justice, God's righteousness. Why? How could we say that the gospel is about God's righteousness? Isn't it about His mercy and Him not visiting His righteousness? No, Paul says, it's about God's righteousness. We just saw a few moments ago in Romans 1:17 that that's what Paul had said there. That in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, and he said virtually the same phrase here. The righteousness of God is manifested.

Paul is telling us that the gospel is the display of the righteousness of God. Now he means that in many ways, and we can't fully explore that. But let me suggest a few ways that he means that. First of all, he's talking about the righteousness of God's character. We just quoted from Proverbs 17 in the passage which says that the judge is cursed who condemns the innocent and acquits the guilty. And

yet Paul is telling us that God pardons guilty sinners.

Well, how in the gospel is God's righteousness displayed then? Because He does that in such a way that the penalty of their sin is paid for in full. So that His character of righteousness is vindicated in the gospel. And Paul's going to use a word for that later in this passage called *propitiation*, the appeasement of the wrath of God due for sin. So God saves in a righteousness way.

But that's not all that Paul means. Paul also means that God is righteous in His covenant faithfulness. He has promised to save His people and His covenant as they trust in Him. That way of salvation is the same in the old and in the new. The old covenant folk looked to the promise of God and the coming Messiah, trusting in Him alone for their salvation, and were saved. In the new covenant we look to the promised Messiah who has come. We trust in Him alone for our salvation, and we find refuge. And God is righteous to do what He said in His promise. And, therefore, in the gospel God's righteousness is demonstrated as He faithfully fulfills the promise that He has made to His people in all ages. So again the gospel displays the righteousness of God.

But the gospel also displays the righteousness of God's condemning judgment. There is no greater picture of the judgment of God in the universe than the cross of Jesus Christ. On the cross of Jesus Christ you see forever, ever revealed that God takes sin seriously, and He will punish you. He will punish it all, and He will punish it all in one of two ways: Either Jesus Christ or you yourself; it depends on which federal head you want to choose.

If you choose Adam, you'll pay for it yourself. If you choose Christ, He has stood in your place. And so God shows us the seriousness with which He deals with sin when He says to us that He delivered up His own Son as a propitiation for our sin. And so God's righteousness is shown in that way. And God's righteousness is shown in its imputation and our justification in its impartation in our sanctification.

The gospel reveals God's righteousness in many ways, but especially Paul is concerned to show that we have been given a standing before God, that we did not earn, and that we did not deserve by the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. Jesus' righteousness was credited to our account. And in all these ways, the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, and Paul revels in this idea.

And then fourthly, I'd like you to see in verse 21 that Paul makes it clear that the gospel is something which is actually evidenced and confirmed by the Old Testament. Paul is telling us when he says, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, he's telling us, "Look, I'm not coming up with some new idea here. I'm not the first person that ever thought of this. I am not the only person to whom this truth has been revealed. In fact, the law and the prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures, your Bible tells you about this way of salvation. Your Bible tells you

about this purpose of God." Paul is telling us that he is not giving us a new teaching, but that this truth of the gospel and this truth of justification by faith is demonstrated in the Old Testament itself. The Old Testament clearly witnesses to it and testifies of the truth of the gospel and the truth of justification by faith. In fact, in Romans, chapter 4, the place that Paul is going to go to show the proof of the gospel from Scripture, is from Genesis, and the story of Abraham. When Paul wants to prove justification by faith, he goes right to the Old Testament, right to the story of Abraham, right to Genesis. And so those people who teach that salvation is by works in the Old Testament, and not by grace through faith in the New Testament have no clue about what the apostle Paul is speaking. That idea never entered into Paul's mind that there was some other way of salvation in the Old Testament than in the New.

You know, often times we ask this question, "Well, we know that salvation is by grace through faith in the New Testament; but I wonder if it was the same way in the Old Testament?" That question would never have occurred to the apostle Paul. Now he might have asked it this way: "Well, we know that salvation is by grace through faith in the Old Testament. I wonder if it's still that way in the New Testament?" But he never, ever would have questioned the truth that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone is an old covenant and a new covenant reality. Yes, in the old covenant they had to look forward to the coming Messiah, but they still trusted in the promised Messiah. In the new covenant we have the completed glory of Jesus Christ. So there's that "but now" there that Paul used in Romans 3:21.

But Paul is telling us that this teaching is not a new teaching. It's actually demonstrated in the life of Abraham. And then finally he says this: "Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe." Paul here tells us this. That God ordained that His righteousness would be received by means of gospel trust and belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul is telling us that this righteousness about which he is speaking is bestowed, is received by faith, by personal trust in God and in His promise and especially in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. Paul is telling us that we receive, we participate in this righteousness about which he is talking about through faith alone, through belief and trust.

It's very important that you notice a couple of things. By faith Paul does not just mean you saying, "Okay, okay, I understand that. I understand that Jesus claims to be the Son of God, the Messiah." That's not faith. Faith is not saying, "Okay, well I believe that Jesus is the Messiah. I believe that." Faith entails knowing and believing and trusting. The Old Testament uses some wonderful images and words to talk about faith. It talks about rolling one's burden over on another person. It talks about trusting in God in the dark when you can't see. Faith is not only belief in the truths which the Bible teaches about Jesus Christ. It is personal trust in Him as your Savior.

And notice especially that Paul goes out of his way to identify the object of faith as Jesus Christ. There are a lot of people today who think that they are saved by their faith. They think that their faith is what commends them to God. That's not what commends you to God. Your faith is not a work. Christ commends you to God; faith is your way of laying hold of Him. And so the object of faith is not our faith, much less our works. The object of faith is Jesus Christ.

And so Paul says, "As we believe in Jesus Christ, as we trust in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as He is set forth in the gospel, so we find the benefits of salvation and are able boldly to stand on that last day." Because in that last day what will make me right before God is not that I have lived a perfect life or one near thereby. What will stand me before God is not that I'm going to be able to keep all of my hidden sins a secret from Him. What stands me before God is that my life is closed with the righteousness of Christ. And Jesus Christ and His righteousness have become my glorious dress.

On that solid rock, we stand. Jesus Christ. His righteous, not ours, appropriated as we have trusted in Him alone for salvation. That is the beginning of the truth of justification by faith as Paul sets it forth here. And we'll continue that the next time. My prayer for you is this, though, that you will not fool yourself into thinking that God will sweep your sin under the carpet, or that you are basically a good person, and that God is going to let you in. Or on the last day saying, "Well, you know, I attended two church two out of four Sundays most mornings." But did you trust in Jesus Christ alone as He is offered in the gospel? That's the only sure foundation for boldness on the day of the Lord. Let's pray.

*Heavenly Father, there is an inveterate temptation in the human spirit to deny our own sin. And once having accepted that we are sinful, there is an inveterate temptation to try and find ways to justify ourselves. Save us from that temptation and enable us to flee to Christ for our eternal good and for Your eternal glory. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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