

The Gospel Story: Justified by Faith

A Study of Romans

Romans 3:21-31

Pastor Bryan Clark

If there is no problem, then there is no solution. And if there is no solution, then there is no hope. When you go to the doctor, would you rather hear the doctor say, “There is no problem,” or would you rather hear the doctor say, “We’ve identified a problem.”? Well that depends. If you are there for your annual physical, you’d probably like to hear there is no problem. But if every day is a day of suffering, if there’s a health issue that is chronic, it won’t go away, it fills your days with pain again and again, you go to the doctor, and the doctor says, “There is no problem,” that means there is no solution, which means there is no hope. Think about how that describes our culture. We feel the darkness of the culture; we feel the despair; we feel the emptiness; we feel the suffering and the pain. There’s something deep in our souls that resonates with the message: This is not the way it’s supposed to be. Something seems desperately wrong. And yet we as a culture have lost our doctrine of sin. We have believed the prophets of *Relativism* who have said there are no moral absolutes. Therefore there is no core problem. We have lost our doctrine of sin; therefore there is no problem, which means there is no solution, which means there is no hope. The best we can say is, “This is just the way it is.”

But what if there *is* a core problem? Paul has spent three and a half chapters painting a picture of the darkness. There is indeed a core problem. It’s called sin—and we are all under the condemnation of sin. “*There is none righteous, no, not one.*” There is no one that will escape God’s judgment. All of us are accountable and there’s not one single thing anyone can do to change that. But after three and a half chapters of painting a very dark picture, Paul writes a paragraph that many theologians would say is the greatest theological paragraph in all of the Bible. If you have your Bibles, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 3. Last week’s text reminded us that there’s no one righteous; there’s no one exempt, all condemned, which is what leads one well-known British preacher to say that two of the most wonderful words in all of the Bible are the words, “**But now...**” which finally give some hint that there may be hope.

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. (*NASB, Romans 3:21)

Paul in Chapter 3, verse 21 expands on a thought he first introduced in Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, when he said,

I’m not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation... (Romans 1:16a)

He reminds us in verse 17 of Chapter 1 that the Gospel Story reveals *the righteousness of God*. We define that righteousness like a two-sided coin. On one side is God’s rightness—that He is utterly right and the standard is perfection, and that’s the standard that God holds us accountable to. But because God is right, out of His rightness flows His compassion and His grace and His mercy and His goodness, and His love that would compel Him to lay out some sort of a plan by which sinful men and women could stand *right* in the presence of a holy God. So now in verse 21, he begins to unpack what that means.

Now notice that the text says: *This righteousness from God comes apart from the Law.* It's a very important concept to understand. God is not righteous because God perfectly keeps the Law. If that were the case, then the Law would be God and God would be measured against it. It's the other way around. God is righteous because He's righteous. It's His essence. It's His nature. It's His character. It's who God has been from eternity past. It's who God will be for eternity future. The Law is simply a reflection of the eternal righteousness of God. The significance of that is it is a righteousness that will never change. It will never be diminished. It will never be soiled or stained. It is the very essence of God. He can't be anything but righteous for all eternity. So His righteousness came apart from the Law and *it was revealed through the Law and the Prophets*, meaning the whole of the Old Testament. God didn't suddenly come up with a plan. From Genesis, Chapter 3 on, God has been unfolding a plan to fulfill His promise to make a way that sinful men and women could have a relationship with a righteous and holy God. So how does that work? Verse 22:

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe...

The best way to understand this is to imagine that you as a sinner, under the condemnation of sin, stand before a holy and righteous God. And you are wearing your sin like a robe. The robe is tattered; the robe is dirty; the robe is stained; the robe is offensive. It's putrid in the nostrils of a holy righteous God. And you realize that you stand there condemned because of your sin. But in a very unexpected and unimaginable act, God nods to a servant and the servant comes over and offers to take the robe off and to discard it—never to be seen again. And the servant brings back a new robe which represents the utter righteousness of God and puts it on your back and clothes you with the eternal righteousness of God, so that when God sees you, He no longer sees the offensive robe of your sin, but He sees His own righteousness. It is the righteousness that can never be lost; it can never be stained; it can never be diminished. It is God's eternal righteousness that now defines you to the extent that God publicly testifies before the world you are absolutely righteous forever. How does that happen? Does that happen for everyone? The text tells us: **for those who believe.**

Now what does it mean to **believe**? In our culture, we would define that word basically as kind of an intellectual assent, "I believe that." For example, in a couple of months, the world will celebrate Christmas, the birth of the Savior, and hundreds of thousands of people will say casually, "I believe that." A few months later the world will celebrate Easter, the resurrection of Jesus. And hundreds of thousands of people around the world will casually say, "I believe that." But they've never actually embraced that truth. They've never actually trusted their eternal soul into their belief that that message is indeed true. The biblical concept of **believe** moves beyond intellectual assent to an element of trust, to an engagement that I'm willing to trust that for something.

One of my friends has had a dream of becoming a pilot and, over the last couple of years, he has worked very hard to see that dream realized. If you were to ask me, "Do you think or do you believe that Don would be a good, safe pilot?" Without hesitation, I would say, "Yes!" At that moment, that is intellectual assent. I have no risk but, yes, I believe that. But all of that changed one day when Don called me on the phone, and said, "Would you be interested in going up and flying with me?" At that moment I either believe it or not. But to move from intellectual assent and actually risk my very life in that belief is a whole new level of what it means *to believe*. At that point it's trust and I'm willing to risk my very life in my belief that: you can do this. And by the way I did, and it was a fabulous experience.

The text tells us that this righteousness of God is placed on us as a robe *if we believe*, if I'm willing to risk the destiny of my eternal soul in my belief that this Gospel Story is indeed true. I have no plan "B". That's what I believe. How do we do that? The text tells us: **through faith**. There is no way for me to put the Gospel Story in a test tube and prove it to you. I can't do that. I have to choose to believe *by faith*. But this is not a wild leap in the dark. This is not a reckless faith. This is not an anti-intellectual faith. This is not kind of a simply-silly-escape type of faith. Frankly, every single person lives by faith. This is not *faith or no faith*. This is about *what* I choose to put my faith in. An atheist chooses by faith to believe there is no God. There's no science that proves that. It's a faith statement. It's a statement to believe that everything is here by chance, that there is no intelligence, there's no design, that something actually came from nothing. There's no science that says that. As a matter of fact I would suggest that's contrary to science. Science would say that something doesn't come from nothing. So you must take a wild leap of faith to believe that. Everybody lives by faith. The choice is: what am I going to believe in? It's *not faith in faith*. Faith in faith means if I believe it hard enough, I can bring it to pass. The text tells us it's **faith in Jesus Christ**. The key is the *object* of my faith. **In Jesus Christ** means believing that Jesus is God, was God in the flesh, came to this earth, born of a virgin, lived a perfect life, was nailed to a cross for the payment of my sin and yours, was buried, three days later resurrected and ascended to the Father and offers salvation freely as a gift. I choose to believe that message is true. I'm willing to risk my eternal soul on that belief. You say, "Wow, who is that for?" It's for those who believe. Does that mean everybody? It means everybody.

... all those who believe; for there is no distinction; (Why?) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (Vs. 22b, 23)

There's nobody that measures up. There's nobody that's good enough. There's nobody that's too bad. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter where you've been. It doesn't matter what's been done to you. There's nobody good enough and there's nobody too bad. There is no distinction. We're all equally condemned under sin. And the offer of God's righteousness is offered freely to anyone. You say, "Well, how does that work? Verse 24:

...being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Now that verse is loaded with theological terminology. Let's start with the word **justified**. This is an absolutely critical theological term to understand. Just to give you some sense of that, the word **propitiation** in the New Testament is used four times; the word **redemption** about eight times; the word **reconciliation** five times; the word **justification** or just a form of that word—over two hundred fifty times! That alone tells you this is a really big deal. The term itself is a legal term and it means to be *declared legally righteous*. The judge declares you publicly to be legally right. Now sometimes people will talk about justification and forgiveness and pardon, terms like that, and use them as synonyms, as if they all mean the same thing. They don't mean the same thing. See if I can help you understand this. Forgiveness and pardon both have negative overtones. What I mean is this: You stand before the judge and the judge says, "Yes, it's true, you are really stinky; you are really offensive, but I choose to forgive you." There are still the negative overtones that you are pretty stinky, but I'll forgive that. A pardon is very similar. "You're guilty; you're pretty stinky, but I'm willing as the judge to pardon you." So maybe the ending message is this: You come before the judge; the judge says, "You are forgiven. You are pardoned. You may go." If that's all a Christian understands about the message, you live that way. There's a lot of Christians that can't get over their guilt and shame. They can't get over their past. They can't stop focusing on their failures and their struggles, because the message is ultimately negative. You are stinky, but I forgive you. You've really blown it, but I give you a pardon. Justification includes forgiveness; it

includes pardon, but it goes way beyond that to the fact that you actually stand before the righteous judge of the universe and He publicly declares to the world that you are absolutely righteous, “Because when I look at you, all I see is My own righteousness.” Now the message is not, “You may go”; the message is: “You may enter in. You are righteous. I want to dance with you. I want to love you. I want to delight in you. I want to spend forever with you.” And because it’s the righteousness of God, it can never be stained; it can never be lost; it can never be diminished; it is fully the righteousness of God that defines you forever. When you begin to understand that, you began to live like it.

He says, **being justified...** How does this happen? **...as a gift.** The Greek word for gift implies a benefactor. Somebody paid the bill and simply turns around and offers you this exchange as a gift.

...as a gift by His grace...

Grace is God’s undeserved favor. It’s favor that’s poured out upon us not because I’ve performed well, not because I’m religious, not because I’ve done some duty, but simply because God in His grace and mercy, God, as an outflow of His rightness, chooses to offer this righteousness freely as a gift.

...being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

Redemption is a street term. It’s actually a slave market term. Probably every single person that was receiving this letter, at some point in his or her life had experienced standing in the street, seeing slaves on a slave block and listening to people bidding to purchase a slave; it would be a very common scene. The word **redemption** captures the idea that it was possible for a rich benefactor to purchase a slave and, as a result of purchasing that slave to set him or her free, to say, “I have purchased you. I paid the purchase price, but I am now giving you your freedom freely as a gift.” That’s the idea of redemption. It implies that a purchase price has been paid. And the text tells us that the purchase price that was paid was paid by Jesus Christ, that He Himself would make the payment. He’s the benefactor who has made it possible to buy you off the slave block of sin, out from under the bondage of God’s condemnation, and to give you your freedom freely as His gift to you. You say, “Well, how does that work? Verse 25:

...whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (Vs. 25a)

There’s a lot discussion around this idea of **propitiation**. There’re kind of three different camps. There’s one camp that denies that God has wrath. And because they deny that God has wrath, they don’t know what to do with the word propitiation, because it is the idea of appeasing or satisfying God’s wrath. So their argument’s very weak and it isn’t widely held. The text has been very clear; God indeed does have wrath. That’s where the whole conversation started. That’s why there is a Gospel Story. God’s wrath is not some out of control angry rant. It’s simply punitive justice—that people will actually be held accountable. They will get what they deserve for choosing to worship the creature rather than the Creator. There is a consequence to that.

There’s argument over the idea of propitiation as it relates to the pagan religions of the day. The other camp ties it to the Old Testament Mercy Seat. I agree with the theologians that say that the imagery is both. The images often have dual meanings like that. So first of all, as it relates to the pagan religions, the Hebrews were the only people that believed in a God of compassion and love. They are the only ones that promoted the idea of a God desiring a personal relationship. The pagan gods were all angry. They were always angry. They were always ready to step in and whack you.

So the whole religious system was based on trying to appease the gods, trying to somehow appease their anger today so they don't whack you. So that was the idea of propitiation—that somehow something would be offered to appease the gods in order to satisfy God's wrath. Paul takes that concept and pulls it in: that we are under the wrath of God and some payment must be made in order to satisfy God's wrath. God is a God who is just and because He's just, He must punish sin. God could not just shrug His shoulders, turn His back on sin and pretend everything is okay. He would cease to be just. He would cease to be righteous. So how does God deal with this? Jesus Christ became the propitiation for sin. He became the payment, the sacrifice that would satisfy God's wrath in order that God might turn around and offer salvation, righteousness freely as a gift of His grace.

The reason some people connect this term to the Old Testament, to the old covenant, is because there is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. It's called the Septuagint. In the Septuagint, the Greek word that's consistently used to describe the Mercy Seat in the Old Testament is this Greek word. And so that's where they get the tie back. The Mercy Seat was basically a grate that sat on top of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was housed in the Holy of Holies, a place that housed the Shekinah glory of God, a place so holy, so terrible, so awful, so magnificent that no one was allowed there except the high priest and the high priest only one time a year. Within the Ark of the Covenant were the stone tablets of the Law. And they reminded the people of their failure to measure up, their failure to live according to the standard. On one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the high priest would take two male goats. On one male goat he would lay his hands and symbolically transfer all of the sins of the people onto the head of the goat. The goat would be taken out into the wilderness and utterly lost, never to be returned again, symbolizing their sin completely removed from the camp, never to be held against them again. The other male goat would be sacrificed. The blood would be collected and this one time a year, the high priest would enter into the Holy of Holies. It was both a time of celebration and a time of absolute terror, as he would enter into the awesome presence of God. He would take the blood to the Ark of the Covenant and there he would pour the blood through the grate in the top of the ark which was the Mercy Seat. The blood would go into the Ark of the Covenant and cover the stone tablets of the Law, symbolizing the blood covering the sins of the people. It was believed to be at the Mercy Seat on that day that a holy God and sinful people would meet. They would meet at the Mercy Seat and the mediator of that moment was the high priest. We are told in the New Testament that Jesus was the fulfillment of that shadow. He is that Mercy Seat. He is that sacrificial lamb. He is that goat that removes our sin, never to have them held against us. He is the sacrificial animal that pays the price for sin. He is the high priest that becomes the mediator between a holy God and sinful men and women. He is the Propitiation, the Mercy Seat, the Payment, the Satisfaction for God's wrath, so that God, as a righteous, just God could also offer salvation—His righteousness—freely as a gift of His grace. The text says,

This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He pass over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Vs. 25b, 26)

What he's saying there is that the reputation of God was always in question until the moment He fulfilled His promise. There was always this tension as to: how could a God who's righteous and just offer forgiveness and salvation as a gift and still remain righteous and just. The New Testament reminds us that the blood of bulls and goats had no ability to remove sin. The people understood that what they were doing was symbolic. It was a foreshadowing of the fulfillment of God's

promise. From Genesis 3 on, God made a promise and the promise was someday He Himself would shed His own blood in order to make sinful people right. For thousands of years the sacrificial system merely foreshadowed, hinted that that would be the case. But there was always this tension, this question until God finally and fully fulfilled the promise that He had made. And that promise was in the lifetime of these readers and Paul says, “It has happened. It is now that God has demonstrated His righteousness publicly by He Himself becoming the sacrifice to satisfy God’s wrath, to make a way for a holy God and sinful men and women to come together as a gift of His grace, that He could become both the just—that means the judge—and the justifier.”

How could God be *just* as the judge in declaring sinful people to be righteous? Answer: Because He Himself took God’s wrath upon Himself. I would be the first one to acknowledge to you this morning there are times in life when God is very mysterious, where God doesn’t make sense, where the circumstances of life seem like they are out of control. And you feel the struggle; you feel the pain. And there’s times when God seems a million miles away. And it feels like God just doesn’t care. I get that. I have been there many times. But I believe with all my heart that you cannot question the love of God. God’s love is not religious theory. God’s love is action. And when we rebelled against God, when we decided to worship the creature rather than the Creator, when we rebelled against God and we soiled and stained our robe and we were offensive in the presence of God and we spit in the eye of God and we were determined to do it our own way, when we were deserving the wrath and condemnation of God, God chose to punish Himself. He chose to condemn Himself to be the sacrifice to pay for your sin and mine, that His wrath would be poured out on Himself in order that He might turn around and offer you His righteousness freely, as a gift of His grace. How can you doubt the love of a God who did that for you?

For the last two thousand years, one of the biggest problems—as people made in the image of God—is: we are still determined to take some credit for our salvation. Verse 27:

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law. (vs.27-31)

For the first century religious Jews, the issue was circumcision. They were saying, “You know, this Gospel thing, it’s fine; we really like the idea of God’s grace, but you still have to be circumcised and you’d have to at least admit the circumcised are a notch above the uncircumcised.” They were still desiring to take some credit for their salvation. Here today it’s probably not an issue of circumcision, but it may be an issue of baptism. It’s Christ plus my baptism. Or it might be communion, or it might be the keeping of the Sabbath, or it might be any list of rules and regulations that, “This is what saves us; it’s what Jesus has done plus works.” The book of Galatians says, “If you add one single work to grace, it ceases to be grace.” The message of Romans is that God has done it all. We in our arrogance try to convince ourselves that we did something to help, and God says, “No way! No way!! You have not done one single thing to contribute to your salvation. I did everything. And I offer it to you freely as a gift.” Legalism always produces spiritual arrogance. Religion always produces spiritual arrogance. But I’ve long concluded that there is no way that you can be spiritually arrogant if you fully understand the Gospel Story. Spiritual arrogance is always symbolic of someone who still doesn’t really get it.

The worst exchange of all time was when we as a human race exchanged the glory of an incorruptible God for the image of corruptible man, when we exchanged the truth for a lie, and we chose to worship the creature rather than the Creator—the worst exchange of all times. But the greatest exchange of all time is when God, in His grace and His mercy, God’s Son Jesus became the Propitiation; He became the Mercy Seat; He became the one who paid the debt for our redemption. He became the sacrifice for sin, when on the basis of what Jesus has done, He offers to exchange your filthy dirty offensive robe of sin for a robe of God’s eternal righteousness, that God forever would declare you before the world to be absolutely righteous in His presence. And He offers you that freely this morning as a gift. My prayer all week would be that not one single person here this morning would walk out these doors still clothed in their offensive stinking sin, but would choose to take the greatest exchange in history and to discard the offense of their sin and have it carried away, never held against you again, and in return, be clothed with the righteousness of God forever. If God offers you that as a gift, why would anyone ever say, “No”? Why would anyone ever say, “No”?!

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that when we were lost in our sin, flowing out of Your rightness came Your love and Your kindness and Your compassion, Your grace, compelled to make a way by which sinful men and women could have a relationship with a holy God. Lord, when there’s no other way, You condemned Yourself; You punished Yourself; You poured out Your wrath on Yourself, so that You could turn around and offer Your righteousness as a gift of Your grace. Lord, there’s not a single person in this auditorium this morning needs to walk out these doors covered in their sin, under the condemnation of their sin. Lord, my prayer is that You would open up each heart to joyfully receive Your eternal righteousness as Your gift to them. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. In your opinion, what is the culture's "doctrine" of sin?
2. Does the culture's approach to sin create happiness or despair? Why?
3. Can you share a time when discovering a problem was actually good news to you because it meant you could identify a solution? How is the Gospel Story like that?

Bible Study

1. Review the conclusion of Romans 1:18-3:20. What words might you use to describe the picture Paul has painted in those verses? Summarize the situation in one sentence.
2. Read Romans 3:21-26. Many commentators would say this paragraph in Romans is the most significant paragraph in the entire Bible. See if you can define the following terms:
 - a. Righteousness of God
 - b. Faith
 - c. Belief
 - d. Justified
 - e. Gift/grace
 - f. Redemption
 - g. Propitiation
3. What is the solution to the problem of sin according to this text? How is that solution obtained? To whom is it available? What is the difference between just being pardoned and being justified? Why does this matter?

4. How does the Gospel Story as described by Paul here in Romans allow God to be both just and the justifier (3:26)? Could God just forgive sinners without the debt of sin being paid? Why or why not according to this text?

5. Can you summarize this paragraph in a few sentences?

6. Read Romans 3:27-31. If the preceding paragraph is true, is there any basis for spiritual boasting? How might we explain “spiritual arrogance”? Who is actually “self-righteous”, the Christian or the non-Christian? Why?

Application

1. The essence of the Gospel story is simple but also can be very hard (not complicated). What is it that prevents people from receiving the gift God freely offers? What would you identify as the number one barrier to people receiving God’s gift of salvation?

2. If you personally have not received this gift from God, what would prevent you from doing so now? Why would you wait? What is it that is preventing you from this decision?

3. Take some time to share with one another your own story of coming to belief in Jesus and how that has changed your life.