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**DATE:** March 8, 2026  
**SERIES:** The Gospel Is  
**MESSAGE:** Justification By Faith  
**PASSAGE:** Romans 3:21-31  
**SPEAKER:** Ryan Harmon

Since our kids and our students are with us this morning, I thought maybe I'd begin with telling a story from when I was a kid. Second grade, Cottonwood Elementary, Omaha, Nebraska, Mrs. Green was my teacher. And there's not much I remember about second grade, except these three things.

Mrs. Green was my teacher, and no one knows her, so I don't feel bad saying it, her breath was horrible. Coffee breath. Now, I probably have it all the time, but as a kid, it was distinct. We had our class in a portable, one of those portable classrooms that was out in the parking lot of the school, I remember that.

Third thing I remember is that one day, I got in big trouble. One day we were going through our class, and at the end of our class, Mrs. Green asked me to take the paintbrushes and take them into the bathroom in the portable and clean them. And so I did, but for some reason, I don't know what got into me, I decided that what needed to happen is the bathroom needed to be redecorated. And so I took those paintbrushes, and I gave it a fresh splatter painting. I covered every inch of that bathroom in watercolor paint. I don't know why. I don't remember at all even washing the paintbrushes. All I remember is doing that, and then returning to my seat, and then Mrs. Green, calling my name.

And I walked to the back of the classroom, and in that moment, I knew, and she knew, I was absolutely guilty. There was no denying it. The verdict was quite clear. I did it. And when something like that happened, when a wrong like that occurs, something has to be done to set it right. Now that was true in second grade, but that's true in all of life. When there is wrong, it has to be set right. When there is injustice it has to be made right.

Now, for a number of weeks in the book of Romans, Paul has laid out a case, and he's made his case very compellingly and very clearly that we are all as human beings in a deep and desperate need because all of us are guilty of sin. He's made that case in an overwhelming manner. All of us are wrong. We are sinful, and as sinners and as unrighteous people, we will face a righteous judge, a righteous God, and because of that, we are in desperate need. The situation outlined for two and a half chapters is quite bleak for each and every one of us.

But now, today, as Paul continues, everything changes. As we continue in Romans today, Paul announces news that is better than we can possibly imagine. So I want to invite you with me to open your Bibles to Romans 3, as we look at verses 21 to 31—this paragraph, specifically verses 21 to 26, that many theologians would say, is the most significant paragraph in all of the Bible, so packed full of glorious meaning. Romans 3 verses 21 to 31, Paul begins with just 2 little words. He says:

*21 But now*



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"But now." Those two words could strike us as merely a conjunction that just sends us into his next thought, but I want to linger there for a moment.

There's one old pastor that says that there's no more wonderful set of words in all of the Bible than these two words, "but now." "But now" introduces a world-changing, paradigm shifting, freedom-bringing reality. And so as we approach this passage, I want to encourage you to look at these first two words, "but now," as the introduction of a promise. What is about to come can absolutely change your life. If we believe what follows on these two words, if we embrace the truth that Paul is about to lay out, then it has the capacity to change our past, to release us from the shame and the guilt of our past. It has the capacity to change our present to allow us to live with joy in this present moment.

And not only that, it has the capacity to lead us into the future, full of assurance, full of hope. All of that. All of that awaits us in what follows. Paul says, "but now." Apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets. But now, apart from the law, that is to say that although the Mosaic law was the system that marked things up until a certain moment, the Mosaic law now marks that which was, and something brand new has broken in, "but now."

*21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested,*

The righteousness of God is an incredibly important phrase for Paul. It's one that he repeats over and over. In fact, in just these short five verses, he uses this phrase four different times, "the righteousness of God." It's a phrase, an idea, that we were first introduced to in our very first week in our study of Romans.

If you can remember all the way back to the beginning of February, in Romans one, Paul laid out his case, and we came upon his theme verses for this entire book, Romans 1:16 and 17. And in Romans 1:16, he said, I am not ashamed of the gospel, I am proud of it, for it is the power of God for salvation. Then he continued in verse 17 he says, for in it, that is, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. The righteousness of God is revealed. Almost verbatim what he says here in verse 21.

So what is the righteousness of God? Way back when we introduced it, we said there were two ways to think about the righteousness of God. The first way to think about it is simply to understand that God alone is righteous. He is righteous and perfect and holy in character, always right. And because he is that way, because that is who God is, all that he does is right, he always acts rightly. That means that as he judges the world, he judges rightly, perfect in justice. So it's God's character, but it also is his action. God acts with righteousness.

Now that's the general sense of the righteousness of God, but here in Romans, Paul is talking about something very specific, very particular. And so when we think of the righteousness of God in Romans, here is what Paul has in mind. He's talking about the specific act and action of God that makes a way for the unrighteous to be considered righteous, that makes a way for sinful, lawless people, to step into a brand new status that is the righteousness of God. God has made a way for you and me, guilty as we are, to receive a different verdict. And that's his righteous act that is described in that phrase, "the righteousness of God." God's made a way for sinful people to be set right.

So remember, "but now," the righteousness of God has been manifested. In other words, something drastic and specific in a particular moment of time has taken place that has changed everything, that's made a way. It's made a way for the unrighteous to be declared righteous, to be



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granted righteous status. And God has acted, and Paul wants to be very clear—his action is in complete continuity with what he has always planned. That's what he means when he says, it's

*21 being witnessed by the law and the prophets,*

In other words, this was always the plan of God, long in the making. God was working, and now he has revealed the fullness of his plan.

So Paul continues in verse 22, repeats himself here for emphasis, he says:

*22 even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;*

Even the righteousness of God. It's almost as if Paul is so astounded by it. He's going to repeat it for emphasis. God has acted, and he's made a way for we who are clearly guilty, who are clearly unrighteous, to be declared righteous by his sovereign act. And the question is, how has he made that possible? And the answer is astounding: through faith. Through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe. This remarkable change, this cosmic change of our status before God comes as the result of faith.

Paul said at the beginning of this book he wasn't ashamed of the gospel. He's proud. He was eager to preach it in Rome. And that's because Paul knew that the world is stuck in a deep and dark problem because of sin. It affects everyone, from the worst person to the best person. Every single person is a transgressor of the law, is ungodly, is unrighteous. Therefore, every single person needs to hear this astounding news that God has acted to change our status. Therefore, he was, he was eager to preach it, eager to preach to the whole world about the incredible thing that God had done in responding to our desperate need. He said, there is no distinction. Everyone needs to hear this news because everyone, everyone is unrighteous. That's just what he goes on to make clear. He reminds us once again in this verse that we are all so familiar with, verse 23, he says:

*23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

All have sinned. We said a few weeks ago, God does not play favorites. Although we are the kind of people, human beings, we're the kind of people that like to rank sins and like to compare ourselves to others, to consider our righteousness or our rightness in relation to that of other people, that's not how God works. Paul's made his case clear. All have sinned. He's outlined that for two and a half chapters. And because all have sinned, all are in desperate need. The problem is absolutely universal.

I think one of the things that would be important for us to recover in the modern church is a good theology of sin. A deep understanding of what sin is and the way it affects our life. To not minimize sin, but to think rightly of it—not so that we can feel more shame and guilt, that's not my point, but so that we can glory more in the cross of Jesus Christ so we can think rightly about why sin is such a big deal and why God had to act.

Sin is...it's a big deal! Sin is a big deal. Let me make an understatement. Here's the way I used to think about sin. When I was in high school, I think even into college, the way I often approached sin was this. See, I was a believer, I grew up in a Christian home, but I had many friends who weren't. And so I had friends who were engaging in sin with reckless abandon. I, of course, was not. But often the way I thought about them is, they were really living it up and enjoying life and I was suffering. But through my suffering, I was making God happy.



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Now, underneath that is this view of sin. Deep down, my belief about sin was that sin was the preferable way to live, but it was forbidden to me. Sin is preferable but forbidden. Now, that is a horrible theology of sin. That is an unbiblical view of sin. See, what sin is, what sin has wrought—it is corruption. It is ruin. It leads to death. It leads to conflict. It leads to the severing of relationships and a lack of integrity in our own life. Life begins to unravel when it is given over to sin. Sin destroys. Sin is the opposite of goodness, the opposite of joy, the opposite of peace. All that God is, sin runs in the opposite direction and it brings about horrific results. Sin diminishes or makes us incapable of reflecting the glory of God.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. See, God made us. He created us, and he intended us to participate in his life and to share in his glory. But because of sin, we are incapable of stepping into that which he created us for. That's all of us, every single one of us, and there's no denying it. Just look in the mirror. The stain of sin is everywhere. The evidence is everywhere. Silly to deny it. As I walked back to the back of that portable classroom, there was no use in denying what I had done, the evidence was splattered all over the bathroom. It was quite clear. To deny it is just a silly effort. And in the same way, Paul is saying the evidence is abundantly clear.

To use the metaphor, our lives are the paint splattered bathroom. You see the evidence everywhere. We are stained. We are guilty. And if that were the end of the story, we would have no hope. But it's not the end of the story. Remember, Paul said, "but now." But now the righteousness of God has been manifested in Jesus Christ. God acted to resolve our deepest need. God acted. And because God acted, everything has changed.

Verse 23 again, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Verse 24:

*24 being justified as a gift by his grace*

I've asked you to take yourself with me to a portable classroom. Now as we get to verse 24, I'm going to ask you to imagine a different scene. Imagine a courtroom, a legal setting, because Paul's language in verse 24 becomes very legal. He uses courtroom language. Imagine stepping into a Roman courtroom. A courtroom was a big forum that the public could come and participate in. And in that courtroom, the accused would walk into the courtroom, and they would come, and they would stand before a large marble stone, upon which a judge or a magistrate would oversee the proceedings. The case would be laid out. The evidence would be presented.

And if you were in that courtroom, standing before that judge, here's the word you longed to hear. You long to hear the word justified. Justified. To be justified is to be declared righteous, to be declared in the right. It is to be acquitted of wrongdoing. To be justified is to have a change of status, to move from guilty to innocent. That's what every person that stood before that judge longed to hear: justified. Declared righteous.

But here's what we know—Paul's made it clear. We said there's no use in denying it. We know that as we walk into that courtroom, we are not innocent. We're guilty. We did it. Just look at the bathroom. We did it. So the question is how could this be? How could this be that we who know we are guilty can stand in that courtroom, and then, in that moment, hear this word from the eternal judge, the almighty of the universe—God looks at us, the guilty and says—righteous? Justified, innocent. That's the astounding gospel reversal.

Now how does it come about? The only answer is: as a gift. Paul said being justified is a gift. This is God's gracious act as a gift that's brought about by his grace. We contribute absolutely nothing. There is nothing that we have done to deserve it. And we need to say, God, in declaring us righteous, did not make a mistake. He is a perfect judge. Not only that, he didn't let us off easy. It's important that we understand this word justification doesn't mean merely "forgiven" or merely



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“pardoned.” Those things are true as well. But justification is a much bigger word than pardon. We are not the guilty who have been given a lenient verdict. We are not the guilty who walk away, living as the eternally guilty, yet forgiven. That is not what God did. God declared us righteous. He changed our very status. We no longer need to live walking as if we are the eternally guilty yet forgiven. Oh, we are forgiven, but God has said, we are justified. We are declared righteous by him as a gift, brought about by his grace.

As we began, I said that what follows after, “but now,” has the capacity to change your life, to change the way you view your past. If this is true, and if you believe it, you no longer need to walk around living in the shame of the past. If this is true, and if you believe it, if you embrace it, you can now walk in the present full of joy knowing that you stand before God declared righteous. If this is true, then we can be full of hope and assurance concerning the future.

Paul's made it clear that there is going to be a future day of wrath, a day when God will judge all things. But here's what we can know as that day approaches. We can know that we have already heard the verdict. It has been given. We have received the future verdict in the present, and the future verdict is righteous, innocent, acquitted. That's what God has done in Christ. That's what God has done in Christ. We have been justified. Not by anything that we have done, not by our works. It was done for us. It's a gift by his grace.

We are justified freely, but now as we continue, we need to understand, it was freely given as a gift, but it did cost something. That's precisely where Paul turns next. Again, in verse 24, the beginning:

*24 being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;*

This is something else that God did for us: he redeemed us. Redemption means, it indicates that we were in bondage, we were enslaved, we were liberated at a price. God paid the ultimate price to free us from our bondage and from our debt. This idea of redemption is a very graphic illustration of what the reality of sin does to our lives. We are stuck, we can't get out. We are in bondage to it. But God paid the price. Jesus paid it all. Therefore, we live liberated now. We are the redeemed of God. He paid the price that we could not pay. Freed us from sin's bondage. Freed us from sin's penalty.

So how and where did he do that? Continuing in verse 25, through the redemption, which is in Christ Jesus:

*25 whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith.*

How and where was this redemption accomplished? It was accomplished at the cross. So on the cross that God publicly displayed Jesus Christ as a propitiation in his blood. Propitiation, that's a big word. Kids, can you say propitiation? Yeah, pretty good. What does that word mean? It's a big word. It's a rare word, only used two times in the New Testament—here, and then again in Hebrews. And in understanding it, I think there are two concepts that are wrapped up in that single word.

The first way to think of that word, propitiation, is that it is a satisfaction of God's wrath. It's a sacrifice that satisfies God's wrath. Some people translate this word propitiation as “atoning sacrifice.” Now, some people today are uncomfortable with that idea, and they don't like that way of thinking about propitiation, because for them, it means this: God was really angry, erratically out of control, and the only way to soothe his anger was for him to take it out on somebody and now that he has, he is satisfied. That's the way people think of that word and that whole concept.



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And I would just say that is a distortion of the word propitiation and also a distortion of God's wrath. That's not what God's wrath is like, and that's not what God is like. When we walk through this concept of God's wrath, when we especially were in verse 18, where it says God's wrath is revealed, we talked about how God's wrath is not chaotic anger. It's not outbursts, erratic, overly emotional. That's not what God's anger is. That's human anger and human wrath. God's wrath is his measured, justified, righteous response to sin.

See, sin has corrupted his world, and God, being perfect and perfectly just and absolutely committed to his world, has to respond. And in fact, his wrath is an expression of his love. Because he loves his creation, he will work to rectify what is wrong with it. Because he is perfectly just, he will act to right the wrong and the injustice that was done. God's wrath is his response to sin. And here's what God did. God, knowing that his wrath needed to be satisfied, that justice needed to be done, God himself entered the scene and paid the price so that his wrath could be satisfied. God satisfied God's wrath by sending his Son. We could never satisfy it. And God is not up there angry, just looking to make someone pay. God himself gave his son that his wrath might be satisfied. Jesus is the propitiation—that's the first sense of the word.

The second sense of the word has deep roots in the Old Testament, the sacrificial system, and particularly in Leviticus 16 in what is called the Day of Atonement. On the day of atonement, the sins of Israel would be dealt with. And in order to deal with the sins of Israel, the high priest would enter into the tabernacle, and then would enter into the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant sat. And on top of the Ark of the Covenant was something that is referred to as the mercy seat—t's kind of like the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, where the 2 angels are—and on that mercy seat, on the Day of Atonement, God would appear. And the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on that mercy seat, and that would make atonement, would wipe away the sin, would forgive the sin of the people of Israel, so that relationship with God could continue on unobstructed.

Now, here's the connection. The word "mercy seat" is the same Greek word as the word "propitiation." So in a very real sense, here's what that means: that Jesus Christ himself was the mercy seat. He was the place where atonement was accomplished. Jesus Christ himself was the sacrifice that was given. His blood was the blood that was sprinkled. God himself acted in and through Jesus Christ so that atonement—forgiveness, the wiping away of sin—might be accomplished. So that God and his people could live in perfect relationship.

God acted in Christ. He did it as a gift by his grace. Jesus paid it all and he accomplished all of it, fulfilling all that the Old Testament pointed to. Fulfilled it at the cross. And he offers it all freely as a gift. A gift of his grace. He continues at the end of verse 25, he says:

*25 This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed; 26 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.*

It is no exaggeration to say that the pivotal moment in all of human history is the cross of Jesus Christ. That is when everything changed. "But now," Paul says. "At the present time," Paul says, everything changes because of the cross. But that leads us to a question: What about those who live before the cross? What about those who committed sin before the cross? And how is God's justice and God's righteousness upheld given the sins of that which came before?

And Paul's answer is to point us to the incredible patience and forbearance of God. God knew his plan all along was to deal with the deep problem of sin and to make a payment for sin at the cross. God always planned on that, and he patiently waited for the right moment. At the perfect time,



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Jesus died. Everything that came before was absolutely deserving of condemnation. But God, in his grace and in his forbearance, “passed over,”—did not give the full penalty for sins—because he knew he was going to pay for all of it at the cross. If we’re at the cross, the sin of all time was dealt with. That’s how sufficient the cross is.

This was done as a demonstration of God’s righteousness, a demonstration of how God justifies sinners by grace through Jesus Christ. This was done so that God would be both just and the justifier. In other words, God upholds his justice by paying for sin at the cross, and God also is the justifier of all who believe through Jesus’ act on the cross. He is both just and the justifier of those who put their faith in Jesus. This is an incredible paragraph.

Now, the question is, in the midst of all this, what do we contribute? Nothing. We contribute nothing. This remarkable change, this paradigm shifting moment, this turn in all of human history and world history, this freedom-bringing reality, is available as a gift by God’s grace. The only way. The only way it can be received is through faith. Through belief. God changes our status and brings all the merits of the cross into our life through simple belief—trust—in Jesus Christ.

So what does this mean today? Well, it means that if you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, all of this is true of you right now, now and forever. You are no longer guilty. You stand declared as the righteous of God. You are no longer condemned. The banner over you, the declaration over you, is “righteous.” You no longer need to pay the penalty for your sin. It has been paid. You no longer live in bondage to sin and death because you have been set free—redeemed through the blood of the cross. Jesus has paid it all, making a way for us to live now and forever in perfect relationship with almighty God. Life is brand new. All of it brought about by Jesus’ work on the cross and through faith. That’s what’s true.

Now, if you have never placed your faith in Jesus, all of that can be true of you today through faith. You who walked in with a clear verdict of “guilty” can leave this place with a declaration of righteousness declared over you simply by trusting Jesus. By putting your faith in him. Our verdict is clear. Paul laid it out, two and a half chapters. We are guilty, “but now.” But now God has made a way for we who are guilty to be declared righteous to change our life forever.

And the question is, why would anyone refuse this gift? Why would anyone refuse it? I think the only possible explanation is we just don’t believe it. We can’t believe it could possibly be true. We can’t believe grace is this good, grace is this sufficient. It’s too scandalous to us. Humans don’t work this way. They don’t just give without expecting anything in return. It’s not the way we work. We struggle to believe it. Too foreign a concept to us.

All have sinned, all can only be saved by grace through faith. See, grace is the end of earning. It is the end of works. Not only that, it is the end of boasting. It’s the end of comparing ourselves one to another. All of us come in under the same verdict. All of us only come out righteous if one thing happened: Jesus died on the cross for our sin, and we receive it as a gift by grace. No room for boasting. That’s precisely how Paul ends this passage, says:

*27 Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. 28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. 31 Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the law.*

Now, that last verse takes us into what we are going to consider next week, but Paul’s point in these verses is that boasting is absolutely excluded by grace. All of us are only righteous by God’s



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gracious act. He's the one who does it. Therefore, we can give up two things: we can give up trying to earn God's favor, and we can give up comparing ourselves to one another. If within your heart there is this part of you that says, "I gotta still make God happy. And I'm thankful that I'm better than so-and-so," then what we need to return to is a deep concept of grace and an understanding of the cross. An understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

See, I cannot save myself. I do not have the power to save. God alone has the power to save. I don't have the ability to rectify, to resolve, the deep and desperate need that I am in. Only God can respond to my desperate need. I don't have the ability to justify myself, to declare myself righteous. Only God can declare you and me righteous. And he did just that. That is the freedom. That is the gift. That is the grace of the gospel through Jesus Christ.

We are justified, righteous, not by works. Only by faith.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you that you acted, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. That on the cross, Jesus, you died to pay the penalty, to pay the penalty that rectifies, that resolves, our deep and desperate need. We were the unrighteous, but in you, we are declared the righteous of God. Help us to fully understand that deep and beautiful truth. By the power of your spirit, we pray. Amen.

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