

Show Me The Righteousness

Scripture Text: Romans 3:21-31

Introduction

At the end of the previous passage, Paul stated that no human being will be declared right with God by observing God's Law. The Jewish people had prided themselves on being God's chosen people who had God's Law. Paul revealed, however, that observing the Law did not bring about our righteousness, but rather revealed our sinfulness. God's Law shows us how unrighteous and sinful we really are. In today's passage, Paul shifted gears by revealing to us how God's righteousness is revealed apart from His Law. You may have noticed the tone of the letter took a noticeable shift in this passage. For the past few weeks, we have read about God's wrath and judgement and how every person is under God's wrath. Paul has already told us that every human being is a sinner and we can do nothing to make ourselves right before God.

In this passage, Paul provided the answer to our terrible plight mentioned in the previous passage. Paul has laid out a case against all humanity that does not leave us in a good place. No amount of good deeds or obedience to God's requirements in His Law will be enough to bring us into a right relationship with Him. This section of the letter also reaffirms an important theme that runs throughout the letter — a theme that we first encountered in chapter one. Paul stated that he was not ashamed of the gospel because in it is revealed a *righteousness from God* that is completely dependent upon faith (Romans 1:17). After building a case against all people, showing our universal sinfulness and therefore our universal need of salvation, Paul then revealed the only way for anyone to be brought into a right relationship with God.

We Are All Guilty Before God

When people share the Gospel with someone they will often speak of our condition, the fix for that condition, the right response to receive that fix, and the results of receiving it. This passage contains several of the most important statements in the letter. When people speak of the *Romans Road to Salvation*, they will often quote verses from this passage. Verses twenty-three and twenty-four are two of those quoted verses:

Romans 3:23–24 ²³ *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴ *and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...*

In these two verses God revealed not only our predicament but also the fix. All people have sinned and have missed the mark that God had intended for humanity. Just as all have sinned, all are justified (declared righteous) by the grace of God. There is no distinction. Again, Paul mentioned the fairness of God. In chapter one, Paul wrote that the Gospel is the power of a God for salvation to *everyone* who believes — both Jew and Gentile. In chapter two, Paul said that God's judgement is upon all who do evil — both Jew and Gentile. Last week, we read how everyone does evil and has the condition of sin — both Jew and Gentile. And so here again, Paul reaffirmed the truth

that no one is exempt from the condition of sin, or God's wrath on sin, or the fix for resolving that sin condition. We are in the same boat!

God's Righteousness is Shown Through the Cross

Oftentimes, I believe we think of the Gospel only in terms of our condition and the fix for it. We may treat the Gospel solely as Jesus coming to earth to save us from our sin, which is true. When it comes to the Gospel, there seems to be a preoccupation with what it means for us, but not so much thought of what it means for God. In this passage, Paul revealed that the Gospel was far more than God saving His creation. It revealed something about God Himself. Paul mentioned it several times in this passage alone. The very first verse in this passage, Paul wrote the following:

Romans 3:21 *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...*

In this section of the letter, Paul wrote that the righteousness of God is revealed. He again mentioned it in verse twenty-five and then said this in verse twenty-six:

Romans 3:26 *It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

After writing about mankind's terrible condition of sinfulness and God's righteous judgement and wrath upon it, Paul ended this chapter by speaking about how God's righteousness is shown to the world through Jesus Christ. Sure, we are the beneficiaries of the grace of God through Jesus Christ, but it was meant to reveal how righteous God is. The primary purpose of God sending Jesus Christ was to show how righteous and how just God really is. The Gospel demonstrated to the world that God is just to punish sin but He is also full of mercy and grace and declares right those who are ungodly. How is this possible? How can He be just and justify the ungodly?

Jesus Christ is Our Atoning Sacrifice

According to what we have read thus far, every person sins and needs to be reconciled to God. We have all offended our Creator, whose nature is to hate sin and to punish it. Unless atonement is made, God cannot accept us. The problem for us is that we lack the ability to atone for our sin. Thus Paul revealed the following:

Romans 3:24–25 ²⁴ *[all people] are **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus,* ²⁵ *whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith.*

There are three terms in these verses that Paul used to describe the Gospel and our benefits for receiving it: *justification*, *redemption* and *propitiation*. *Justification* is a legal term used to describe how God declares one "not guilty" but rather right with Him. It is the opposite of condemnation. For followers of Jesus Christ, we were once under God's

wrath and condemned, but now we are declared right with Him. *Redemption* is a term borrowed from the slave market that describes how God has paid our debt of sin and purchased us for Himself. We were in bondage to sin but God has bought our freedom through the sacrifice of His Son. *Propitiation* is a word that we probably do not use often. It comes from the Old Testament sacrificial system where an animal was killed to satisfy God's wrath. Paul mentioned that Jesus Christ was "a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." Another way to say this is that Jesus is the sacrifice that satisfies God's wrath upon us and repairs our relationship with God.

Through my daily Bible reading, I recently read through the Old Testament sacrificial system and God's requirements for the sacrifice. I noticed through my reading that the altar of the tabernacle was very bloody. With all the sacrifices performed, there was a lot of blood on and around the altar. This made me think about what God might be telling us through these passages. We no longer sacrifice animals for our sins, so what was the point? Then it occurred to me — *sin is costly*. Sin destroys. Sin is deadly. Sin costs life. Another observation is that we should be shocked by the Old Testament sacrificial system, the bloodiness of the altar and all those animal sacrifices. Sacrificing life should produce a strong negative response in us, because our sin produces a strong negative response to God. When we sin we make something other than God more important to us. We steal God's glory and that is offensive to our holy God.

But there is something else about the Old Testament sacrificial system that we should remember. Since sin is so serious and so costly, there is no remission of sin without the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:22). We can react negatively to the old sacrificial system and to the shedding of innocent blood for our sin, but that is exactly what God did for us. The old sacrificial system foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice where God sent His very own Son to die for the world. The writer of Hebrews wrote:

Hebrews 10:4, 12 ⁴ *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins....¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God...*

The Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to the great sacrifice Jesus Christ made for us. Sin is costly and our sin cost God His Son's life. The innocent Son of God willingly laid down His life, to be tortured, beaten, and killed on the cross of Calvary by His own creation. We should be shocked by the blood of the altar, but we should also be shocked by the blood of Calvary. Your salvation cost Jesus His life. Are you shocked by the blood of Jesus that was shed on the altar of Calvary? God could have directed His full wrath and judgement upon us all, and He would have been just to do so. However, because He desired to show His glory, His mercy, and His grace, and because He loved the world so much, He sent Jesus Christ so that whosoever trusts in Him, would receive grace, forgiveness, and eternal life with Him. This showed God's righteousness. Jesus' death on the cross was the sacrifice that satisfied God's wrath and provided salvation to humankind.

We Have No Reason to Boast

Paul followed up the description of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus with another question. You can tell that Paul was a lawyer, or a teacher of the Law, because he liked to ask a lot of questions. In verse twenty-seven, Paul asked, “Then what becomes of our boasting?” If God is doing this work and it is meant to glorify Him, what can we say about it? What claim do we have to boast in this? Paul most likely had the Jewish people in mind when he asked this. Though they may have been God’s chosen people and may have received the Law of God, since a right standing with God is not based upon the Law, they had no room for pride. Thus Paul wrote the following:

Romans 3:28 *For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*

This verse is another very important statement in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul clearly acknowledged that we are declared right, justified, with God, not by following the Law, but by having faith in Christ. Thus, Paul’s question applies to us as well. Did we do anything to accomplish salvation through Jesus Christ? No! On the cross, there was what I call a “Great Exchange” that occurred. Our sin was placed on Christ Who endured God’s wrath. In exchange for those who trust in Jesus Christ, His righteousness is imputed to those who believe. Our sin is placed on Jesus, in exchange for His righteousness upon us. We cannot boast in our right standing with God. We cannot even boast in our faith. Faith is not the cause of our salvation, but rather the means by which we obtain it. The cause of our salvation is God’s grace. It is a gift that is received by faith.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is radical compared to what mankind usually does. The righteousness God provides is based upon what God did, not upon what people may accomplish. It is received, not earned. It depends upon faith, not merit. God justifies the ungodly, not the righteous. We have no reason to boast. If being made right with God is solely through faith in Jesus Christ, what can we possibly point to in ourselves that will justify our right standing with God? Absolutely nothing! We have no righteousness to show. It is Jesus’ righteousness that is shown in us when we accept God’s gift of salvation. We can claim nothing.

Sometimes, we forget this. Sometimes we think that because we have accepted Christ, or because we are in the Church, or because we do this or that, that we are somehow righteous. We may not say this, but our attitude is “Look at me. Look at what I have done or at what I am.” We sit securely in the illusion of our own righteousness, when in reality, any righteousness we have is imputed by Jesus Christ. We have no claim on it. How many times did Paul mention God’s righteousness in this passage? Four! How many times did Paul mention our righteousness? None! Now, it is true that for those who admit they are lost and under the wrath of God, and who turn in faith to Jesus Christ, trusting in Him for salvation and forgiveness, those people are *declared righteous* by God. That is different from being righteous by our own works. Christians are declared righteous based upon faith in Jesus’ righteousness. We must trust in the only One Who is righteous in order to be declared right with God.

Conclusion

In closing, how shall we respond to this passage? May I suggest with humility, thankfulness, and praise? If we have heard one thing over and over from this passage is that we all are in the same boat in regard to our sinfulness and the fix for that condition. No one can claim to be righteous by his or her own accomplishments. We must trust in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary to be declared right with God. We have nothing to boast about. We should also be extremely thankful to our Lord and Savior for the free gift of salvation and for protecting us from God's wrath. We cannot earn salvation, yet God has freely provided to whosoever will receive it. If you have not received it, I encourage you to look to the cross today. Turn from your sin and the fantasy of thinking you can be good enough. You will never be good enough. Lastly, we should praise our great God and Savior. The cross of Jesus Christ ought to compel us to worship Him for through the cross God's righteousness is revealed. God is shown to be a just God Who declares the ungodly righteous in His sight. That is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!