

How Can We Be Right with God?

Romans 3:21-24

As we come to our text in Romans today, we are turning a corner. For 11 sermons now, covering two and a half chapters from Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20, the word of God has charged us with how unrighteous we are and how much we deserve the wrath of God. With each verse our guilt has multiplied until the night of our sin has smothered us in darkness; there is a deathly chill in the air between God and men and the frightening blackness is looking irreversibly permanent.

But God doesn't just expose our sinfulness to make us feel bad—His purpose is to make us feel desperate! Desperate enough to wrestle with the question of the ages. Job asked the question: **“how can a man be righteous before God?”** (Job 9:2).

Now as we come to the first two words of Romans 3:21, it almost seems too good to be true: **“But now...”** Paul is indicating that what is to come next will be refreshing, amazing, and liberating. God is about to do something new.

For the first time since Romans 1:17 we receive hope for the sunrise—and a beautiful sunrise it is! While sin has left us hopelessly condemned to death, God in His righteousness and grace is about to change all that.

The Reformers referred to this section of Romans as the “marrow of the Bible.” You'd be hard pressed to find any other passage as significant and profound. If last week's sermon was saturated with the stench of sin, this week we'll experience the sweet showers of salvation as we move from guilt to grace and from God's wrath to His righteousness.

Let's read Romans 3:21-26 together:

21 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;

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

24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,

26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

We can capture the main theme of this passage in one sentence: ***God's righteousness has made a way for us to be right with Him through faith in Jesus Christ.***

Paul gives us several aspects of this righteousness that we need to understand if we truly want to understand how to be right with God.

1. Righteousness is from God ([Ro 3:21a](#)).

This passage helps us see salvation from God the Father's perspective. Look at verse 21: **"the righteousness of God..."** Paul is mainly concerned here to talk about God's righteousness. He mentions righteousness in verses 21, 22, 25, and 26, plus the word "justify" in 24 and 26, and "just" in v. 26. In Greek, all of these words come from the same word root. God's righteousness refers to His absolute holiness or separateness from all sin and all that is wrong.

Since no one was born righteous, the only source of righteousness is God himself. Too often we view salvation from our perspective alone; selfishly focusing only on how it benefits us.

Imagine that I am a passenger on a ship bound for New York City. My ship has an explosion and sinks and I am the lone survivor. As I float helplessly in the water I know that I am doomed to die because I can do nothing to save myself. Just then a ship suddenly appears on the horizon and someone spots me. The ship turns from its course and stops to rescue me. I should be grateful that I have been spared and overjoyed just to be alive. But if I start to think that the ship's main purpose was to save me, then I will think I can tell the ship to turn around or expect the captain of the ship to accommodate my every need.

When we make this mistake, God becomes our servant, the one who is there just to "meet our needs." While we are the beneficiaries of salvation, the real reason that God has provided a way for us to be right with Him is in order to proclaim His righteousness and to promote His glory. God and His glory are to be at the center of everything. As verses 25 and 26 say, God has made us right with Him through Jesus Christ, to **"demonstrate His righteousness."**

The theme Romans is the righteousness of God. It is God as the center of righteousness, it is God as the source of righteousness, it is God as the stream of righteousness outflowing. God is righteousness, God demands righteousness, and God provides righteousness through Jesus Christ.

It's not all about us. It is about God demonstrating His righteousness and His glory.

2. Righteousness is not from Law but witnessed by the OT (Rom. 3:21b).

The emphasis in verse 21 is on the phrase **"apart from the law."** The righteousness of God that He reveals cannot come from the law. This would have been very troubling to those from a Jewish background. As we saw last week, you and I can't get right with God by keeping the law, because it is impossible for sinners to keep the law. As verse 20 said, **"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."** We cannot be made right with God by what we do. Our good deeds cannot outweigh our bad deeds. If we were to keep all of God's law but stumble in just one point, we would still be law breakers.

The law was never given to people to make them right with God, but to show people how much they need a Savior.

The law does however, reveal the righteousness of God. Look at the last phrase of [Ro 3:21](#): **"...being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."** **"The Law and the Prophets"** is the whole Old Testament. The fact that being right with God comes apart from the law is not a new discovery. It's exactly what the Old Testament teaches.

In presenting these **"two OT witnesses"**, Paul also makes the point that God's righteousness is predicted and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. Men have always

been justified by faith, the Old Testament saints by looking forward to the Cross and the New Testament saints by looking backward to the Cross. To say it another way doctrine of justification by faith was **foreshadowed** by the OT **Law** and **foretold** by the OT **prophets**.

In Romans 4 Paul gives two examples of this Old Testament witness, Abraham and David, both of whom bear testimony that the righteousness of God is given to men by faith, even though neither man knew the fullness of how it was to come about through the life and death of the Messiah.

We saw in Romans 1:17 Paul has also already given witness from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk who declared, **"The just shall live by faith."** (Hab 2:4 in Ro1:17).

Isaiah probably saw the shadow of the Messiah more clearly than any other Old Testament writer, predicting both His suffering life and His substitutionary death in **Isaiah 53:10-11:**

10 Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.

11 He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities.

As a result of the labor of His (Messiah's) soul, He (God the Father) will see it and be satisfied. By His knowledge **My Righteous Servant**, will justify (declare righteous) the many, as He will bear their iniquities (speaking of Christ's substitutionary sacrifice). (Isa 53:11).

3. Righteousness comes only to those who recognize their sinfulness (Rom. 3:22-23).

The amazing truth about God's righteousness is that it is for sinners only:

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

It's difficult for us to fathom but in God's eyes there is no difference between the serial killer and the social worker. Ray Pritchard writes:

When it comes to needing salvation, there is truly 'no difference' between people. Since all are sinners, all need salvation.

The phrase **"all have sinned"** is in the past tense and it takes us back to the earlier verses in Romans 3. Everyone, without exception, has sinned. The word "sin" literally means to miss a target. It's the picture of an archer whose arrows always come up short of even hitting the target, much less the bull's-eye.

We **"fall short of the glory of God"** means that in the present tense we perpetually come up short. God's glory is the sum of all his attributes, His weightiness, and His worth. The phrase "fall short" comes from an athletic contest and was used of a runner who fell down and never reached the finish line.

J Vernon McGee explains "no difference" this way...

When I was a young preacher I thought that the grace of God had to go way down to reach the bad sinners but didn't have to go down so far to reach others who weren't so bad. But now I know that God's grace has to go all the way to the bottom to get all of us. Each one of us is completely lost outside of Christ. Either you are

absolutely saved in Christ, or you are completely lost outside of Christ. All of us need the righteousness of Christ. There is no difference.

So this righteousness is from God, it is not earned by what we do, and it is only given to those who recognize they are sinners. How can a righteous God give His righteousness to guilty sinners?

4. Righteousness is based on the grace of God (Rom. 3:24a).

God's glory is a target I can never hit and a race I can never finish. It's also a gift I can never earn. Romans 3:24 says that we are ***"justified freely by his grace."*** The word ***"freely"*** literally means "without a cause" or "without a cost." Salvation comes without any cause in us. It comes freely to us without our paying for it in any way. Forgiveness is given freely to those who don't deserve it, to those who actually deserve condemnation. And that's exactly what grace is.

This definition of grace is helpful and easy to remember because it uses the letters of the word: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. Grace is God's unmerited favor but it's actually more active than that. It is God's free favor bestowed on those who deserve His condemnation at the cost of His Son.

One ad for the U.S. Marines Corp pictures a sword, and beneath it the words: *"Earned, never given."* If you want to become a Marine, be prepared to earn that name through sacrifice, hardship, and training. If you get it, you deserve it. But if you want to become a Christian, you must have the exact opposite attitude, for the message of the gospel is: *"Given, never earned."* You cannot save your own soul, and God will not save anyone who tries to earn salvation, but only those who will humbly receive it as a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ. If you get it, you absolutely didn't deserve it.

5. Righteousness is provided by the death of Christ (Rom. 3:24b-25a).

Look with me at Romans 3:24-25 where we are introduced to three vivid word pictures:

24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith ...

Let's look closely at each of these wonderful words: justification, redemption, and propitiation.

Justification. This is a legal term from the world of law. To justify means to "declare not guilty." Wayne Grudem defines it this way: *"An instantaneous legal act of God in which He thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ's righteousness as belonging to us."* We are found not guilty but we are also declared righteous. In fact, according to 2 Corinthians 5:21, we are given the righteousness of Christ. Your sin record is wiped away and you are credited with the perfect, eternally secure righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Redemption. This term comes from the marketplace. In short, to redeem means to set free by the payment of a price. This concept of redemption has deep roots in the Old Testament, with God known as Israel's Redeemer (Psalm 78:35) and all of life touched by the principle of redemption – from the obligation to redeem the first born to the annual celebration of Passover, to the concept of the kinsman-redeemer in the Book of Ruth.

In the ancient world, slaves were routinely bought and sold. The only way to be freed from slavery was for someone to pay the price and then set the slave free. This purchase price was called redemption. Redemption is the deliverance of someone or something through the payment of a price, or a ransom. Jesus saw Himself as the ransom price to purchase those who are slaves to sin in Mark 10:45: ***“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”***

He bought us, took us off the market of sin and made us His own.

Do you remember one of the cries of Christ from the Cross? Right before He died, he declared loudly in John 19:30: ***“It is finished.”*** This is a term from the world of commerce that literally means, *“It has been, and now stands, paid in full.”* It’s like having a bill of sale to say that nothing more is owed, it’s all been paid up.

The old hymn says,

*Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain,
He washed it white as snow.*

Propitiation. Some translations have this as the ***“sacrifice of atonement.”*** This has its background in the world of religion and sacrifice. The word propitiation literally means *“to turn away wrath by the offering of a gift.”* Amazingly, this picturesque word has its root in the mercy seat as described in Leviticus 16. Once a year, on the day of Atonement, after making a sacrifice for himself, the High Priest would take the blood of the sacrifice, and enter the Most Holy Place, where he would see the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the Ark was a little bit of manna, Aaron’s rod, and a copy of the 10 Commandments. On top of the Ark was a lid made with pure gold and two cherubim were carved into the ends facing each other. This mercy seat or atonement cover was a picture of the throne of God. The High Priest would carefully take the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle it on the atonement cover or mercy seat.

Now, on every other day of the year, what did God see when he looked down? He saw the Ten Commandments, which were a testimony against the sins of the nation of Israel. Without the mercy seat, this box was an Ark of Judgment. On the Day of Atonement, when God looked down He saw the blood of the innocent sacrifice and not their sins.

Jesus Christ is our propitiation. When Jesus shed His blood, His sacrifice was the gift that satisfied God’s righteous wrath. All of the accumulated sins of the entire human race were placed on Jesus and all of God the Father’s wrath was unleashed on Him. That’s why Jesus cried out on the cross, ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** What ought to be a judgment seat has now through the blood of Jesus turned into a mercy seat. God is no longer angry because the punishment for sin has been placated. Don’t miss the importance of the shed blood of Jesus.

Over 200 years ago, William Cowper was deeply depressed and lived under the fear of God’s wrath. One day he flung himself into a chair by a window and saw a Bible there. Let’s listen to his own words: *“I opened it up and my eyes fell on Romans 3:25, which says of Christ, ‘Whom God has made a propitiation through faith in his blood.’ Then and there I realized what Christ’s blood had accomplished and I realized the effects of his atonement for me...and then and there I trusted Jesus Christ and a*

great burden was lifted from my soul.” Looking back on that day, Cowper wrote a hymn several years later with these words:

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

These wonderful word pictures are portraits of grace for the believer. We are guilty sinners in need of justification; we are slaves in need of redemption; and as those under the wrath of God we are in desperate need of propitiation.

Word	Setting	Meaning	Result
Justify	Courtroom	To declare righteous	Acquittal
Redemption	Marketplace	To release from slavery	Freedom
Propitiation	Temple	To turn away from wrath	Acceptance

6. Righteousness is received only by faith (Rom. 3:25a).

God has done everything that is needed but in order for His righteousness to be applied to our account it must be received by faith. Look with me at the references to faith and belief in these verses: **“Through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe”** (22), **“through faith in his blood”** (25), **“faith in Jesus”** (26).

Do you understand what Biblical faith is? Too many people today say, **“Just have faith”** as a synonym for optimism or hope. Real saving faith is not just being optimistic. It is trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and His shed blood on the cross. What Jesus has done is of no benefit to you until you personally believe.

Faith is more than just knowing the truth or being moved emotionally by it; true saving faith always ends in personal commitment; a receiving that results in a personal relationship.

The night before a convicted murderer was to be executed; a man came to visit him wearing a black suit with a Bible in his hand. Not wanting to see a preacher, the prisoner shouted to the jailer: *“I don’t want to see that man! Religion never helped me before and it certainly won’t do any good now!”* The man in black looked deeply into the prisoner’s eyes, turned and walked away silently. The next day, as they were about to execute the prisoner he was asked if he had any last requests. The prisoner said, *“I do. I stayed up all night wondering who that visitor was. Who was he?”* The officer paused and said, *“That was the governor of the state who came to give you a pardon! Today you are not going to die just because of your crime, but because you refused to accept the pardon.”* Friend, you can be set free from a sentence of death and receive a full pardon – but you must reach out and take it, before it’s too late.

God’s pardon is now on the table...and it does seem too good to be true. What are you going to do?

1. **Acknowledge** the wretchedness of your own unrighteousness.
2. **Believe** that Jesus died in your place to justify you, to redeem you, and to offer propitiation to the Father so that His righteous wrath is now satisfied.
3. **Confess** with your mouth that Jesus is your Lord. *God’s righteousness has made a way for us to be right with Him...and we are justified when we receive Jesus by faith.*

Back in the eighteenth century, a young boy was born into a Christian home. For the first six years of his life, he heard the truths of the gospel and he was loved. Sadly, though, his parents died. The orphaned boy went to live with his relatives. There he was mistreated and abused and ridiculed for his faith in Christ.

The boy couldn't tolerate that situation, and he fled and joined the Royal Navy. In the navy, the boy's life went downhill. He became known as a brawler, was whipped many times, and participated in some of his comrades' being keel-hauled. Finally, while he was still young, he deserted the Royal Navy and fled to Africa, where he attached himself to a Portuguese slave trader. There, his life reached its lowest point. There were times when he actually ate off the floor on his hands and knees.

He escaped and then became attached to another slave trader as the first mate on his ship. But the young man's pattern of life had become so depraved, he couldn't stay out of trouble. As the story goes, he stole the ship's whiskey and got so drunk that he fell overboard. He was close to drowning when one of his shipmates harpooned him and brought him back on board. As a result, the young man had a huge scar in his side for the rest of his life. After that escapade, he couldn't get much lower. In the midst of a great storm off the coast of Scotland, when days and days were filled with pumping water out of the boat, the young man began to reflect on the Scripture verses he had heard as a child. He was marvelously converted. The new life John Newton found is reflected in his own heartfelt words, familiar to millions now:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound—

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind but now I see.