THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Romans 3:21–26

Key Verses: 3:24,25a

“…and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Today’s passage is brief, but in these few verses Paul gets at the core of what the Christian gospel is all about. He mentions Christ twice (22,24). He uses theological words like “righteousness,” “justified,” “redemption” and “propitiation,” yet doesn’t say much about what they mean. But with the expression “by his blood” we know that he’s mainly referring to Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. For Paul, Christ’s death on a cross marked a watershed in human history. So he begins this passage with the words, “But now…” In Christ’s death God accomplished by far the greatest miracle he has ever done. Ironically, his death on a cross is the ultimate gift of God’s grace, available to anyone “at the present time” (26). It still offers the possibility for hostilities between the holy God and sinful humanity not just to come to an end but to fundamentally be healed. If we believe, it transforms who we are, how God sees us, how we see ourselves, and how we live. Though we may have heard it many times before, let’s take a few moments to try to appreciate more fully just how radical and how amazing this gospel is. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

As we’ve seen in chapters 1–3, Paul has been building a case. He’s been out to prove that no human being is righteous, “no, not even one,” and that all people, both Jews and Greeks, are “under sin” (3:9,12). Even those who try to keep the law are not righteous before God due to their hypocrisy (2:1–3). Human unrighteousness is not just “a series of unfortunate events;” it incurs the wrath and fury of God which he will one day inflict on people (1:18; 2:5,8; 3:5). We all deserve it. We all are helpless under the power of sin. We all have no way to escape God’s wrath. That’s the real state of human righteousness, “unmasked.”

Look at verse 21. Paul begins with “But now.” He’s talking about a new era (cf. 6:22; 7:6). It’s new because God himself has intervened in human history. Paul adds the phrase “apart from law,” to also suggest that in the gospel there’s a new idea. What is it? The Jews thought God had given them the law so as to make them righteous. That was the old era. Because they knew the law and heard it read regularly they felt superior to others (2:13,17–20). But they were not being honest about their hypocrisy (2:21–24). Paul explained that God had given the law not to make us better than others but more accountable to him, with a deeper knowledge of our own sin (3:19,20; 7:7). The law could never make anyone righteous, on account of the sin dwelling within us (7:17). This is why God is now doing something new, “apart from law.” Paul quickly adds, “…although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.” He’s referring to the promises God made in the Scriptures (1:2). Working to keep the Old Testament laws can never make anybody righteous (3:20a; Gal 2:16), but God’s promises in the Old Testament point us to the new thing he had planned to do all along.

Read verses 21,22a. Here Paul repeats the phrase “the righteousness of God” twice. He mentions it two more times later (25b,26). The righteousness of God is at the heart of the gospel. The righteousness of God explains the ultimate meaning of Christ’s death on a cross. But what does “the righteousness of God” mean? At first Paul seems to be referring to God’s character: his justice and mercy, holiness and faithfulness. That’s how he uses the word “righteousness” in verses 25 and 26. But in verses 21–22 he’s saying something different.

He begins by saying that this righteousness of God “has been manifested” (21a). The Greek word for “manifested” literally means “to cause to be seen clearly,” with the nuance of telling a secret. People may have gotten glimpses of God’s righteousness here and there in his great acts of judgment and salvation in the Old Testament. But the full nature of God’s righteousness was like a secret or a mystery that had never really been seen. At the end of Romans Paul says the gospel is “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” (16:25), and in his other letters he also frequently calls it a “mystery” (Eph 1:9; 3:3,4,6,9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26,27; 2:2; 4:3). At the beginning of Romans Paul has already stated his main thesis: in the gospel “the righteousness of God is revealed” (1:16,17). Now in 3:21–26 he finally explains what this means.

What is this righteousness of God that is “revealed” or “manifested” in the gospel? Read verse 22 again. Paul is saying here that God’s righteousness is something that *people* actually *receive*, through faith in Jesus. He says it’s for “all,” meaning for anybody, with “no distinction,” whether we’ve been struggling all our lives to be a good person, or have gone in the entirely opposite direction. But how can that be? How can God’s righteousness be for anybody? Read verse 23. This verse tells us that sin is the great leveler. Because all have sinned, all people are basically the same. We see distinctions between people based on their income, education, ability, ethnicity or culture. But to God, everybody’s the just the same: sinful. Yes, there are degrees of sin, but to God, whether our sin is great or small, we’re all cut off from him. To “fall short of the glory of God” means not to measure up to God’s standards. God made us all in his own image, to be like him in his righteous character. But nobody ever gets there. It’s like what the prophet Daniel told King Belshazzar: “…you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting” (Da 5:27). In God’s image we all should be like spiritual heavyweights with a godly character, but our sin makes us too light to move God’s scale a smidgeon, even if we’re jumping up and down on it.

Read verses 23,24. These verses explain how we receive God’s righteousness as our own. In Greek the word “justified” has the same root as the word “righteous” (*dik-).* This word “justify” is a crucial theme in Romans, repeated five times in this chapter alone, and many times elsewhere (3:20,24,26,28,30; 2:13; 4:2,5,6,25; 5:1,9,16,18; 8:30,33; 10:10). Being “justified” isn’t just about getting a “not guilty” verdict in a legal case, or proving our innocence to people. It’s something *God* does for us. In daily life we spend a lot of time and energy trying to justify ourselves, to people, or maybe to ourselves. We defend and excuse all kinds of our wrongdoing or negligence. Still, people look at us with critical eyes and judge us. But if we simply put our faith in Jesus, God himself justifies us (8:33). It’s amazing! Despite all our ugly sins God washes, sanctifies and justifies us in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by his Spirit (1Co 6:11; cf. Tit 3:5–7). Elsewhere Paul testifies, “…not having a righteousness of my own…but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Php3 :9). This is the gospel: God justifies sinners by faith.

Read verse 24 again. Paul says we’re justified “by his grace as a gift.” Nothing we could ever do could justify ourselves before God. But God in his righteousness *gives* us *his* righteousness by his grace as a gift. What a gift! It’s the best gift there ever was! We have to receive God’s grace as a gift; otherwise we’ll try to find a way to boast that we deserved it or earned it (Eph 2:8,9). In verse 24b Paul says “…through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” “Redemption” was a word used on the slave market. It meant paying the price for a slave to gain his freedom, or to belong to a new master. In this case, it’s what God paid to set us free from our sins and to belong to him from our hearts. This “redemption” also means “forgiveness.” Ephesians 1:7 says, “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” God’s redemption in Christ is the riches of his grace to us.

Read verse 25a. God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood. This is a bit hard to understand. But in everyday language the word “propitiation” has a simple meaning: to get someone to stop being angry with someone else. It also carries the meaning of making a just payment for whatever wrongdoing that caused the anger. For example, if somebody broke something of great value to us and just took off, we’d be angry. But if that person came back and paid for the item and even added extra money for the inconvenience and mental trouble, then we might stop being angry. In a sense this illustrates our relationship with God. But in this case, it’s mutual. God has wrath toward us because of our sins, and we have hostility toward God, not because he did anything wrong but because of our own evil behavior. There’s no way to get out of this mutual hostility. But God put Christ forward as a propitiation when he shed his blood. His blood turns God’s wrath away from us (5:9). Also, as we consider Christ’s body hung on the cross for us, our attitude toward God changes. We’re no longer alienated from God, hostile to him and doing evil in rebellion against him; instead, God makes us holy, blameless and above reproach (Col 1:21–22). Paul puts it plainly later in 5:1, “…we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In verse 25a, the blood of Christ is essential. We might like it better if God could just simply say, “I forgive you.” But it doesn’t work like that. To God, who is holy and just, when a sin is committed, a life must be sacrificed in order for him to forgive. It’s *that* serious. So the Bible tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22), because God considers the life of the creature is in the blood (Lev 17:11). God taught this lesson to his people through the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. All that animal blood being shed over and over again didn’t really take away any sin; it was just a shadow of what God was going to do in Jesus (Heb 10:1). Because Christ presented himself unblemished to God, his shed blood has the power to pay for all our sins, past, present and future. His shed blood, once for all, has power to cleanse both our consciences and all our sin (Heb 9:12,14; 1Jn 1:7). The catch is, we have to receive his blood by faith (25a). We have to believe God’s promise that through the shed blood of Christ, all my sins, no matter how terrible, really *are* forgiven. This is the gospel. This is how we receive the righteousness of God and are truly justified in God’s sight. This is how we live by faith in his grace: we hold onto God’s promise to us in the blood of Christ as our only righteousness.eb

Through Christ’s death on a cross God himself paid the price to redeem us and be at peace with us. In verses 25b Paul mentions how God in his divine forbearance had, for a time, passed over former sins of those before Christ, both people in general and the people of faith (Ac 14:16; 17:30; Heb 9:7–11,15). But on the cross of Christ God “showed” or “proved” his righteousness. In the world we see all kinds of evil and unrighteousness, and God seems to be silent. But when we look at the cross of Christ, God’s righteousness is seen vividly. God took sin so seriously that he crucified his one and only Son to pay for it all (1Pe 1:18,19; 1Co 6:20; Isa 53:5). And in sending Jesus to the cross God showed that he never forgot all his promises to save us and make us right with him. Through the cross of Christ God proved his own just character, and, at the same time, he justifies the worst of sinners who have faith in Jesus (26). This is indeed the wisdom of God (1Co 1:23,24). For this we can only praise God.

Read verses 24,25a again. May God fill our hearts with his grace and with the deep conviction that God justifies us, God gives us his own righteousness through the blood of Jesus as the gift of his grace. May God help us share this amazing good news with people who are living in darkness and hopelessness.