

## “TOTAL HELP FOR TOTAL NEED”

Studies in Romans – 4

Romans 3:21-31 (p. 1092)

By the time you get to the end of the third chapter of Romans, I hope you begin to sense that the theme of the letter really is “good news.” That’s what the word “gospel” means. The word originally was “godspel” or “God’s story.” In other words, the gospel is the story of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ to overcome the compounding crisis of sin. And for those of us who are acutely aware of the problem of sin in our lives, this story comes as the very best sort of good news.

However it should be obvious that the gospel is not good news to those who don’t want to hear it. A person who is determined to live a life of sin couldn’t care less about the possibility of being set free from it. Those who don’t consider themselves lost would see no reason to rejoice in the news that they’ve been found. And that is why Paul takes the time to lay out his “bad news” section in such detail at the beginning of this letter. He wants to underscore and personalize the compounding crisis of sin.

I want us to be clear about one thing from the start. The need for salvation does not depend on a person’s awareness of the need. Just before the Titanic rammed that iceberg, there was no particular awareness on the part of its ill-fated passengers that they needed protection. However that didn’t change the situation. In the same sense, every one of us stands in total need of God’s forgiveness. But only to those who recognize their need, and who act appropriately, does that forgiveness become real. And for them, the gospel is good news indeed! Now let’s get into Paul’s gospel.

In his Credo in 1:17 Paul wrote: “*For in the gospel righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is from faith to faith – as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’*” It should be fairly obvious the key word is “righteousness.” But **what does “righteousness” mean**, and **how do we get it?** (Or to use the proper theological term, how are we “justified?”) Those are the two questions I want us to think about today.

**1.** First, let’s ask: **What does “righteousness” mean?** In 3:21, Paul begins his defense as abruptly as he ended his prosecution. And it’s no accident that the opening words of the defense echo his Credo. He says: “*But now the righteousness of God, apart from the law, has been made known...*” The good news revealed by the gospel, Paul says, is that God has provided us with his

righteousness, a righteousness that has nothing to do with how well we've managed to keep the Ten Commandments or how religious we might have been.

Take note of what he says here, because this is where Paul lays the groundwork for his doctrine of salvation. And if you understand what Paul is teaching here, you'll have a good grasp of the essentials of the Christian faith; because everything else that he has to say flows from this theological center.

Remember, Paul ended his prosecution in 3:20 by stating, "*No one will be declared righteous in (God's) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*" I know few people who would be likely to consider that "good news." Who enjoys being told that they're a loser? In fact, our nature is to try to prove that we're not losers; that we can be "righteous" on our own. So what do we do? We try to win God's approval by trying to obey all the rules and do all those things we think will please him.

Hindus have prayer wheels, while Muslims bow five times a day to Mecca. Demon worshippers will cut themselves in a religious frenzy, while Christians (who are generally a little more reasonable) try to maintain regular attendance at worship and be kind to their neighbors. Mormons have their family nights and Roman Catholics say their rosaries; while Presbyterians, of course, form committees. The common denominator in all this religious activity is that, in each case, the hope is that, if only we do the right things, God will accept us – approve of us.

That is to say, according to the vast majority of people who inhabit this globe – righteousness is something a person earns. Of course the problem with that approach is that it doesn't work. In fact, the harder a person tries to be "righteous" the more obvious it becomes that you cannot do it on your own. However, this new righteousness of which Paul speaks has nothing to do with human effort. It is, to use Paul's words, "the righteousness of God." God gives us his righteousness. It is God's gift to us, pure and simple.

I think it's important for us to take the time here to be very clear about the difference between "righteousness" meaning "right behavior" and "righteousness" meaning "right standing" before God. In Matthew 7, Jesus said, "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father.*" Now, that is ethical righteousness – that's "right behavior." Paul spoke about that same kind of ethical (behavioral) righteousness back in 2:7 when he wrote: "*To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But... there will be trouble and distress for everyone who does evil.*" The central feature of that kind of righteousness is that it is behavioral.

But here in 3:21 (as in his Credo) the "righteousness of God" refers to that right standing, or right-relatedness that is part-and-parcel of God's character and

God's gift to us. Ethical righteousness refers to conduct; positional righteousness refers to status. I want to be clear on this. God doesn't provide us with ethical righteousness. In other words, he doesn't "make us behave." That is our responsibility! Every parent knows that ultimately you can't make your children behave. They have to choose to behave.

From Paul's perspective, we are obliged to behave righteously as a result of having been declared "righteous" in God's sight. Ethical righteousness (which we'll get into in chapter 6) grows out of positional righteousness. The important thing to note here is that the righteousness that God offers us, this right relationship, is a gift – something we could never earn or achieve on our own.

2. Now, so far we've talked about what this "righteousness of God" is. But there's another question: ***How do we receive that righteousness, that "right-relatedness."*** Or to use the proper theological term: ***How are we "justified?"***

**a.** First, let's look at justification from our point of view. This justification certainly isn't something that happens to us automatically. If that were the case, we wouldn't be free to choose it. And as I said early on, Paul never loses sight of our freedom; nor will he ever let us forget that we're free, and therefore responsible for our choices.

So this "righteousness of God" isn't something that is forced on us against our will. At the same time, it isn't based on anything we're able to accomplish. So, if it's not automatic, and if it's not based on works, how do we get it? The answer is in verse 22. "*This righteousness from God,*" Paul says, "*comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*" There are three things, I think, need to be acknowledged in verse 22:

First, a right relationship with God comes "through faith." Our faith is the key. If you believe that God has accepted you, you're accepted. Faith is simply choosing to say "yes, thank you" to what God has already done – because God is faithful.

Second, this right relationship is uniquely available through faith "in Jesus Christ." Ever since the death and resurrection of his Son, God has called us to place our faith in him as Savior and Lord; the one who has healed that broken primary relationship with God.

Third, this right-relatedness is available through faith in Jesus Christ "to all who believe." It's inclusive. In fact, Paul goes on to say in verse 23, "... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and (all) are justified freely by his grace." That's our side.

**b.** Now let's look at God's side of the transaction. In verses 24-25, Paul borrows three different images to describe what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. (No wonder Paul has been dubbed "the master of mixed metaphors.")

First, Paul says that we have been “justified” by his grace. He borrows the word “justified” from the practice of law. Literally it means to be acquitted. All the charges are dropped. And this acquittal is absolutely free, because it’s based on God’s grace – his unwarranted, unearned favor. You’d think that sinners would love to be acquitted, wouldn’t you. The problem is our sinful pride. Imagine what you’d feel like if you had to file for personal bankruptcy. It would be humiliating. Well, admitting moral bankruptcy is no less traumatic, even if it’s true. But God, our witness and judge, knows our need, and he has ruled that in Jesus Christ the charges against us are dropped. We are “justified.”

Second, Paul says, we are justified through the “redemption” that came by Christ Jesus. Here he borrows the term “redemption” because it refers to the ransom paid to free a slave or to free a captive taken in war. Again, you’d think anyone who was addicted to sin, held captive against his will, would welcome the gift of freedom. Sad to say, that’s not how it goes. And anyone who has ever worked with problems of addiction knows that the strange sense of security that is part of the addiction is an incredible hurdle to overcome. But God knows our need, and in Jesus Christ we are “redeemed.”

Third, Paul says that Jesus was the sacrifice of “atonement.” The term “atonement” is a religious word rooted in the worship of ancient Israel. And although it involved various forms of sacrifice, the purpose was to break down whatever barriers there were between God and the people. Someone once described the purpose of atonement in a little play on words – that the word “atonement” can also be spelled “at one ment.” The Lord knows our need, and by the gift of his life, we are reconciled to God – we are “at one” with God once more.

Well, there you have it. In the opening lines of his great “defense,” Paul says that in Jesus Christ, God has provided us with a righteousness, a right-relatedness to him, that we could never achieve on our own. This righteousness is God’s free and gracious gift; but it will mean nothing to us unless we choose to accept it.

There is, however, a huge question that Paul hasn’t yet addressed. The question is: Why? Why would God do this for us? You may know the answer to that question which, up to this point in the letter, is only implied. But you’ll have to wait until chapter 5 before Paul will spell it out. And before that, he wants us to grapple seriously with the issue of what faith is. So next week we’ll look at chapter 4. But we’re in for a little surprise. Because the man Paul chooses to cite as a prime example of faith wasn’t even a Christian! Your assignment for this next week is to study chapter 4.