

Our Righteousness from God

Romans 3:21-24

May 27, 2018
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If there is a question that has haunted humanity since time began, it is the question, *how can I be right with God?* It is not always expressed like this. It is more often expressed as, *something's missing in my life. I'm searching for what life is all about. I have to go find myself.* It is seen in the frenetic energy we put into our search for meaning in non-God things like our careers, our relationships, our accomplishments, our families, and even our hobbies. The man camping out this week in the infield at the Indianapolis 500 who was hoping for a glimpse of his favorite driver while showing off his giant tattoo of the man's face on his back may not say, *how can I be right with God?* but his whole life is consumed with seeking and connecting with someone he perceives as ultimate.

Of course, religion is the institutionalizing of this question. All religions seek to provide a way for man to get back with God (monotheism), gods (polytheism), or mother earth (pantheism).

All our longing and searching is rooted in this basic question, *how can I be restored to God?* This question is the silent foundation for all the cathedrals, mosques, synagogues, and temples of the world. It lies behind so many of our feelings of loneliness and disenchantment.

Man's default response is to try harder and do better. Religion feeds this response as all of them contain moral and spiritual doings that promise something better from God. Just do better. Just try harder. Perhaps you have been in a religious system that promoted this way to be made right with God.

This reality is what makes the text we have before us one of the greatest in the Bible. Scholar Leon Morris calls it possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.¹ We are going to tackle it by highlighting four key words: Righteousness, sin, justify, redemption.

Remember what Paul has said to this point. Beginning in Romans 1:18 he has systematically explained how all men are under the wrath of God—the Gentiles, by virtue of God's silent witness to his moral will through creation and conscience, and the Jews, who have the law of God, but fail to fulfill it. He quotes from the Old Testament which says, "*None is righteous, no, not one* (3:10)." Why is that important? To be right with God you have to be as righteous as God. Morally perfect. Absolutely without sin. But none of us are. He makes the point in 3:19 that not only are we all guilty before God, we are all accountable to a holy God forever.

If Romans ended at 3:20 it would go down as a lament. Three chapters of sober reality. It would urge us to get ready for hell.

But Romans doesn't end at 3:20. In what is surely the most awe-inspiring and hope giving transition of verses in the Bible, the Apostle Paul unveils the greatest news of all.

¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 173.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:21–24)

But now. But now. Imagine that there were no such words. Imagine if, "None righteous, no, not one," were the final words. Yet that's not what it says. But now. *What's that? There's hope? Something's happened? But now. I don't have to go to hell? But now. How? What? Tell me! I'll do anything! But now. Now what?*

*"But now the **righteousness** of God has been manifested apart from the law."* (Romans 3:21, emphasis added)

Righteousness

What does "righteousness" mean? That word is incredibly important in Romans and in heaven, so let's make sure we know what it means. *"God's righteousness means that God always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right."* (Wayne Grudem)²

God's righteousness is the outward expression of God's holiness and purity. Everything he does is consistent with his moral character, including his justice against those who violate his character. Let's talk about Satan since we don't mind Satan getting his comeuppance. Satan rebels against God. Satan acts against God's righteousness. God judges him and throws him out of heaven. Yes. Good riddance. Justice required it.

But what about us? *"None is righteous, no, not one."* (Romans 3:10) None of us live consistent with God's moral standard. He is righteous. We are unrighteous. We are "non-God-like-ness."

Returning to a standing before God where we are righteous is the greatest need we have. Truth in the grandeur of creation can't get us there. The Old Testament law can't get us there. But now a way for this right standing before God *"has been manifested."* (Romans 3:21) The NIV translates it, *"has been made known."*³

More commands? More tablets written on stone? More can't do it perfectly, so I'm condemned anyway stuff? No.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it." (Romans 3:21)

Paul is mindful of his Jewish audience in the church of Rome and emphasizes that while this is new it is tied to the Old Testament Scriptures that prophesied it. Here is the unity of God's revelation and plan of salvation. Jesus did the same as he explained his mission on the road to Emmaus exegeting himself from the Old Testament. I say that especially now as a leading evangelical teacher recently urged Christians to "unhitch" from the Old Testament. The New Testament never unhitches from the Old Testament. Rather, it seeks to show how

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 204.

³ *Holy Bible, New International Version®*, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

the gospel of Christ fulfills it, particularly in the book of Hebrews. Beware of such teaching. Here, this new way to right standing with God is spoken of by the Old Testament writers.

"The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (Romans 3:22) There you have it. The essential gospel. Not through creation. Not through conscience. Not through trying to obey religious law. No. Right standing before God through faith in Jesus Christ. He adds for emphasis, *"for all who believe."* This is his summary statement, but in typical Paul form, he must explain this, so he unpacks it by returning to our hopeless condition.

*"For there is no distinction: for all have **sinned** and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:22-23, emphasis added) There is no ethnic/spiritual distinction before a righteous God. Gentiles? Condemned. Jews? Condemned? You and me. Condemned? Why? For all have sinned.

Sin

What is sin? Do you know? We use the word all the time. *"Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature."*⁴ (Grudem)

Who has done this? Everyone. All have sinned. All have rebelled. All fall short of God's glory. What does that mean? We all have fallen short of God's ordained purpose for us, which is to bring him glory by living righteously. God made us for his glory but we don't live for his glory. We live for our own glory. We all fall short of God's glorious purpose.

Are you in agreement with this? Be careful because this bluntly refutes the doctrine of our society that all men are good. According to what is taught in our schools and media it would read, *For all are good and fulfill the glory of man.* Any failures by us can be easily explained away by victimhood, which shifts any blame to others or society as a whole. The sin and personal responsibility language of the Bible is unacceptable and inappropriate for the modern man.

My parents were in town this week and my 4-year-old daughter Kiralee gave up her bed for them to sleep there. She had a nap upcoming and I told her where she had to sleep. She was very upset and went up to my mom and said, "Can you discipline Daddy?" My Mom said, "No, he's too big." She said, "Please, can you discipline daddy?" We are OK with moral accountability as long as we are talking about somebody else's moral accountability.

Yet the Bible says, we are personally responsible to God. We are sinners. We sin. Now you may say, *I am not as bad as others I know. Or I'm not Hitler. I'm not a mass murderer or whatever.* But the standard is not others, the standard is God's perfect righteousness.

*"The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of it; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of a [mountain]; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they."*⁵ (Bishop Moule).

All have sinned. All fall short. But here is the glorious news. *"and are **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 3:24, emphasis added)

⁴ Grudem, p. 490.

⁵ Bishop Moule as quoted by John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 109

Justified

This word and truth dominates Romans from here on out. It comes in various forms: *justify, justified, justification*. It is a legal term. A forensic term. In our legal system it is the equivalent of the announcement by a judge at the end of a trial, *I hereby declare you not guilty*. We have seen that moment either in person or in TV dramas. A sense of relief comes over the accused that the truth has come out. Justice has been done. He or she has been declared not guilty.

What do we call it when someone did the crime but somehow at the end of the trial is declared innocent? We call that injustice. When the criminal gets a free pass. We are incensed. We demand justice.

Justification is not God declaring we, the innocent, forgiven. No. We are not innocent. We are far from innocent. We are all sinners. We are all guilty.

Justification is not God making us innocent. Justification is God declaring us innocent. Declaring us righteous. Legally granting us a status in his eyes of completely righteous. Are we righteous? No. But we are declared to be righteous. This is justification.

How can God do this? He explains in verses we will get to, but please notice how the verse continues, *"and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."* (Romans 3:24)

Here we are in high school graduation season. Lots of gifts are being given. If you see a recent high school graduate driving down the road in a new German-made car, what do you think? *Wow, McDonald's is paying amazing wages these days!* No. You don't think that because there's no way an 18-year-old working at McDonald's could buy an \$80,000 car. There's only one explanation for a senior in high school driving an \$80,000 new black German-made car. He got it as a gift from Mom and Dad. This is why when you see said 18-year-old driving his fancy car with a smirk smugness on his face, it's so maddening. *Your 3.25 grade point average didn't earn this car. Your third chair trumpet accomplishment didn't earn this car. Your 5th place homecoming king vote didn't earn this car. You have what you have because it was given to you.*

"By his grace as a gift." We have our right standing before God purely as a gift.

*"One of fallen humanity's most difficult tasks is to accept righteousness as a gift. With every fiber of their moral being, people want to earn God's favor. From a human perspective this sounds both reasonable and noble. The hidden agenda, however, is that it would provide a basis for boasting. God neither needs nor desires our help in doing what we could never accomplish."*⁶ (Robert H. Mounce)

If you see a sinner in heaven, what do you think? *Your 3.25 moral grade point average didn't earn this. Your life of doing good works didn't earn this.* At the same time, if you see a sinner in hell what might you also think? *Your moral grade point average earned this. You have exactly what you deserve.* So, if a sinner is in hell, it is his fault. If he is in heaven, it is God's grace.

⁶ Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans*, p. 116.

Justification isn't God making us righteous or the old Sunday School definition, *just as if I'd never sinned*. Get that out of your mind. It is *in spite of the fact that I have sinned*, yet I am declared righteous.

The legal eagles and social justice warriors are saying to themselves, God can't just willy-nilly do that. No righteous judge has the right on his own to declare a criminal innocent. That is true and it applies to God as well. His holiness and justice and righteousness requires payment for sin. But look at the rest of the verse, "*And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 3:24, emphasis added)

Redemption

This word has so long been associated with the gospel that we miss its origin related to slavery. Historically, redemption was to make a payment to set a slave free. Slaves had a redemption price. Someone could pay the price to set the slave free. When he did, the slave was "redeemed."

This is the answer to the justice warriors who look at biblical justification and protest, *God is unjust in making us just. God is unrighteous in making us righteous. Our freedom must cost something.*

The parallel on Memorial Day is profound. Why do we celebrate Memorial Day? It shapes our understanding of our freedom as Americans. We live in a free society. Free from what? Free from tyranny. Free from fascism. Free with rights granted to us by our constitution.

We are free, but is our freedom free? Memorial Day reminds us that our freedom has come at a tremendous price. According to one study, total service men and women killed in wars in US history is around 1.1 million. 1.1 million people died so that we could be free. Is freedom in the US free? A tremendous price has been paid so we can worship freely, speak freely, vote freely, and live freely.

God offers forgiveness of sins freely. God offers justification freely. God provides salvation freely, but that doesn't mean it is free to God. An unimaginable payment had to be made. "*and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*" (Romans 3:24) Just like 1.1 million have paid the ultimate price for our "free" freedom, Jesus Christ paid the ransom price by his death on the cross. This payment allows God to be both, "*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" (Romans 3:26)

Jesus' death fulfilled the righteous requirement of God's moral law and his death in our place allows God to give what is free to us while maintaining his own righteousness in giving it. He is "*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" (Romans 3:26)

So, we end where we often do. What about you? Christian, can God's Word bring you again to a point of profound gratefulness for righteousness given to you as a gift? To once again stand amazed that God would pay such a price for your redemption? To look to Jesus and see in his death the ransom payment for you? To see yourself standing in eternity righteous and forgiven experiencing the joys of eternal life and eternal bliss knowing you don't deserve it? It is the ultimate gift.

And for the not-yet-a-Christian, understand through God's Word that this glorious salvation comes only by faith—not by your doings or goodness or accomplishment—but simply by trusting in this gospel that all who believe in Jesus as Savior and Redeemer will be justified in God's eyes.

So, may Christians be amazed, humbled, and grateful. May sinners be saved today by putting their trust in Jesus and receiving this free gift. May God be glorified as just and justifier of all who believe in Jesus.

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