

Called to Righteousness

Bible Background • ROMANS 3

Printed Text • ROMANS 3:21–31 | Devotional Reading • JOHN 10:1–11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson we will: SUMMARIZE Paul’s teaching that justification is by grace and not acts of keeping the Law; REJOICE that we need not atone for our sin ourselves by works; and EXPRESS thankfulness for Jesus, our perfect Savior.

In Focus

The Johnson family had been in turmoil for generations. The dynamic between family members was one wanted to be better than the other. If they didn’t have the best spouse, they had to have the best children. If they were going off to college, it had to be the best, with the most amazing academic, musical, athletic, community service, or religious scholarship available. The family members had standards preset before they were born, and it sometimes was impossible to meet them. These standards did not leave room for their humanity—yet the whole Johnson family needed grace. One particular generation had all the troubles you could imagine. Something about Thanksgiving brought their sins to the forefront. They just knew that their elders were going to condemn them, as they should have. In that moment transformation began. Each family member learned he or she was not the only one with sin and not alone in the need for grace.

The family learned it was never their works that made their name great. It was the fact that they were born into this family, and loved by the family, that made their works important to the family. They did not have it all together, but they decided to work toward being better, simply because the ones who loved them believed they could.

How can we embrace and show grace toward ourselves, those closest to us, and those we do not know?

Keep in Mind

“Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood” (Romans 3:24-25a, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Sin hamartia (Gk.) — To miss the mark or target.

B. Righteousness dikaiosune (Gk.) — Justice, right standing, right relationship.

Say It Correctly

Propitiation. pruh-pitch-ee-AY-shuhn.

Righteousness. RIY-chuhs-nis.

KJV

Romans 3:21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

NIV

Romans 3:21 But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago.

22 We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

23 For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.

24 Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.

25 For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past,

26 for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus.

27 Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith.

28 So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.

29 After all, is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Of course he is.

30 There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles.

31 Well then, if we emphasize faith, does this mean that we can forget about the law? Of course not! In fact, only when we have faith do we truly fulfill the law.

The People, Places, and Times

Jew. The word originally referred specifically to a member of the state of Judah (2 Kings 16:6), which was named for Jacob's fourth son. The word first occurs in 2 Kings 16:6 (KJV), when the ten northern tribes called Israel joined with the King of Aram to fight against Judah. In the New Testament, the word Jew is used to describe members of the Jewish faith and their leaders. In modern times and especially in the state of Israel, the word is used to describe ethnic birth, but not necessarily religion.

Background

The book of Romans is one of Paul's epistles, a letter he wrote to one of the earliest Jesus-following communities that formed and grew after Jesus' ascension to heaven. Paul begins the letter by describing the guiltiness of humanity, deserving God's judgment, and the power of the Gospel to save us. At the time of Paul's writing, there had been some confusion among new followers and opponents of Jesus alike, as they didn't understand the relationship between the Law that God had given to the Jews long ago and the effects of God coming to earth in Jesus, submitting to death, and then being raised again. Was it following the Law that put a person in right standing with God, or was it faith in this more recent work of God? In Romans 3, we begin to hear how God justifies us sinful human beings by the work that God has done through Jesus' death and resurrection, as opposed to the work we do in attempting to follow the Law. Here, Paul gives an explanation of the importance of each of these methods of justification (works and faith), the way that God has chosen to transition us from one method to the other, and how this is good news for each and every one of us.

Have you ever received the benefits of someone else's hard work with little to no cost to yourself? How did it feel to receive this?

At-A-Glance

1. Righteousness Through Christ (Romans 3:21–22)
2. Freedom From Past Sins (vv. 22–26)
3. Responding to What God Has Done (vv. 29–31)

In Depth

1. Righteousness Through Christ (Romans 3:21–22)

Justification was always by faith in God (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:11; Habakkuk 2:4). In the era of the Old Testament a person expressed his faith by following God's commandments and obeying the Law that had been given to Moses. Yet the people became caught up in the ritual and the Law to maintain right relationship with God and atone for their sin. But now, God offers right relationship to all through faith in Jesus Christ who fulfilled the Law. God came to earth in Jesus Christ, died, and rose again, all for the purpose of showing God's own righteousness and faithfulness to humanity. God kept the covenant and invites us into right relationship. This flips the expected formula for right relationship with God on its head for people who had only known of the Law for all of their lives. God shows His love for humanity by coming down to earth and submitting to death on a cross as the ultimate atonement for our sin. This act of God is greater than anything we could try to do to live righteously or save ourselves from sin. Righteousness is by faith in Jesus Christ!

How does knowing that God has restored us to right relationship through Christ impact the way we reflect on the stories of the Old Testament?

2. Freedom From Past Sins (Romans 3:22–26)

Paul reminds us that though God has shaken some things up, one thing has not changed— every single person is guilty of sin. But through this new act that God has done, our sinfulness is no longer in the spotlight. Instead, it is God's own righteousness and love that are at the center of our relationship to God. Sin loses its power as a barrier between God and us.

Historically, in the event that someone disobeyed God's Law, the way to return to right standing with Him was through sacrifices and sacred offerings unto God for the atonement of sins. This is part of the reason the Roman church is confused about what religious or cultural affiliation a person needs to have to receive this gift; in the

Old Testament, a person essentially needed to become a Jew and follow these practices to be in good standing with God. Paul teaches us that God no longer requires these traditional sacrifices and offerings—we are now free from this process. Instead of repeatedly needing to offer sacrifices to reconcile with God, Jesus offered Himself on our behalf, as an ultimate sacrifice to end the need for any other sacrifice. Now, we no longer lose standing with God because of our past sins, so long as we believe in the truth and power of what God has done for us through Jesus. We've received the fruit of Jesus' redemptive act simply by grace, and that fruit is made effective in our lives as we grow in faith.

How does freedom from past sins change the way you think of your future sins?

3. Responding to What God Has Done (vv. 29–31)

The Greek word for justification is the same word elsewhere translated as righteousness. Another way to understand this idea is that we learn and receive true righteousness by having faith in God's righteousness. God makes this possible through the work of Jesus Christ, freeing us from the process of needing to atone for sin through the rituals and practices that had been given to the Jews. Now, God simply asks that we have faith in God's love for us and all that He has done. But that isn't the end of it. Paul points out that this doesn't simply mean that we are free to carry on in sin or that the Law is no longer true. Instead, our love for God should drive us to holy living that aligns with the commands He communicates to us in the Law.

How do you respond to what God has done for you through Jesus Christ? What feelings do you experience? What actions do you take?

Search the Scriptures

1. Paul argues that God is righteous. What does he have to say about human righteousness (Romans 3:23)?
2. Why would God first give us the Law to follow and then send Jesus later? Do human beings gain something from this (Romans 3:21, 31)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. God's Law is not just established for the purpose of keeping order. What makes God's Law more than just a "set of rules"? How is it an experience?
2. Do you believe the rules and the law of this world are fair and just? Do you think they could contradict God's Law?

Liberating Lesson

Our world and our societies are built around the laws and systems that we create for ourselves. All communities have them, whether formal or informal; we even have them in our circles of friends and neighborhoods. Because laws are such an integral part of our daily lives, it makes sense that we would struggle to receive this gracious gift of simply being freed from past sins. We have a hard time understanding how we can be rewarded or blessed without having earned it, or how our wrongdoings could go unpunished. Our earthly communities fall into chaos when individuals choose to disobey or disregard laws—this is why we've created prisons and systems of punishment and reward. But as much as we feel comfortable with this way of maintaining community, we also see the laws and systems we've created fail repeatedly, especially when it comes to minority groups and historically oppressed peoples. But God does not have that fear. We can rejoice and find relief in knowing that God's laws are actually good for us. We don't have to be suspicious about whether something is truly for our good or if God has some sort of plan to use the Law against us. The sacrifice of Jesus is proof of God's love and goodness. All we need to do is learn to receive and believe in the gift. And as we receive this, we can begin to trust that it is God who justifies us and our neighbors, not our works, and not the laws and judgments that are passed on earth.

Application for Activation

Spend some time writing in your journal about some of the judgments that have been passed on you,

particularly those that you have accepted as true. Write them down and ask God if these things align with the way that He sees you. Write out God's responses, remembering that God's voice is always loving and compassionate, not condemning or discouraging. Also consider specific people in your life upon whom you may have passed judgment. Invite God to reveal to you how He views those people. Are there individuals you feel led to reconcile with or apologize to? Are there people from whom you need to receive reconciliation or apologies? Challenge yourself—commit to beginning a conversation with one or more of the people who come to mind. Ask for God's guidance and presence in the midst of these interactions.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Romans 3:21–31

21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

When Paul began his argument proving that all humanity was guilty before God, he used the phrase “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all” (from 1:18). Humanity was indeed worthy of God’s wrath. “But now” is a favorite expression of Paul (see Ephesians 2:11–13; 1 Corinthians 15:16–20). The apostle uses this phrase when transitioning from a gloomy, seemingly hopeless situation to something divinely wonderful: the manifestation of “the righteousness of God.” As used here, God’s righteousness is not a reference to His character. Paul deals with that aspect of righteousness later in verse 26. In verse 21, righteousness refers to God’s gift of righteousness to all those who enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:19–20). By faith in Christ and His work of atonement, unrighteous sinners receive God’s righteousness. This means that God forgives all their sins and provides a new “right” standing with Him. God’s gift of righteousness includes victory over our sinful nature (Romans 6:12–14), separation from evil (2 Corinthians 6:14), and new eternal life under the rule of God (Romans 5:21). God’s gift of righteousness is without the Law. The word “without,” from the Greek word *choris*, means absolutely apart from. God’s gift of righteousness has absolutely nothing to do with the Law. Paul further states that this righteousness is witnessed to by both the Law and the prophets. The Law, in this case, refers to the Torah or first five books of the Bible, which explain the sacrificial system the Jews were to follow. When the Jews took their sin offering to the Temple, laid their hands on the bullock’s head, confessed their sins, and killed the animal, they attested to their belief in a righteousness not their own (see Leviticus 4:1–4).

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: 23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

God freely offers righteousness to all who have “faith in Jesus Christ.” One must have faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. He is the only way (John 14:6). Paul states that God’s gift of righteousness is “unto all and upon all them that believe.” It appears that the apostle is repeating himself here. But in fact he is using very precise language to say that God’s gift of righteousness is not universal. It does not save everyone. God’s righteousness is available “unto all.” His righteousness only comes to, or is “upon,” “them that believe.” There is a condition for receiving God’s gift and that condition is faith in Christ.

The latter part of verse 22 (beginning with “for”) and all of verse 23 form a parenthetical statement. Faith in Christ is the only condition for the gift and “there is no difference.” The word “difference” is a translation of the Greek word *diastole* (dee-ah-STO-lay) and means distinction. In other words, God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. He treats both exactly the same. Just as there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, there is no difference between the liar and the murderer in regard to their righteousness with God. Both are equally lost and in need of God’s gift of righteousness.

To drive home his point that all the world is under sin and condemnation, Paul employs two phrases that are related to sporting events. In the phrase, “For all have sinned,” the verb “sinned,” from the Greek word *hamartano*, pictures a warrior’s arrow or more commonly used spear falling short of its target. Sin is pictured as missing the mark of God’s call for humanity. “Fall short” (Greek: *hustereo*, hoo-STAIR-ee-o) can point to lateness and loss. It pictures a runner losing a race. The point is that humanity fails to achieve its ultimate goal, which is the glory of God. The verb “sinned” is used in the past tense to indicate God’s view of sin. The Creator looks back on all sin as an accomplished fact. He simply says, “All have sinned.” The fact that all “come short” is present tense and could be read “all continuously come short.” This clause refers to our practical everyday living. We all sin continuously. John, the beloved disciple, explained it this way, “If we say we have no sin

[present tense], we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say that we have not sinned [past tense], we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:8, 10).

The meaning of the phrase “glory of God,” (Gk. te doxes tou theou) is hotly debated. The term is generally used to describe the aggregate of God’s divine attributes and God’s revelation of Himself (see Exodus 34:6–7). This cannot be what Paul means because humanity is not condemned because of our inferiority compared to God’s attributes. Another interpretation is that in this case the glory of God means divine approval or praise, leaving us to understand that we do not receive God’s approval in our sinfulness. Others believe the glory of God refers to what John mentions in his Gospel, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Jesus’ glory spoken of in the Gospel of John was not the out-shining of His divine attributes because He did not display that divine glory then; He had set it aside (Philippians 2:7). The glory of God referenced here is likely the operation of human beings in their God-ordained right relationship with Him and the fullness of their calling.

Paul later explains what it means to function in that fullness (Romans 8). When we are in right relationship with God, operating as children of God, our relationships flourish. Picture Adam and Eve in the Garden before sin. They were operating in their divine purpose as God’s children and representatives on the earth: They had right relationship so they could stand in God’s presence sinless; they were in right relationship with one another; and the Garden was flourishing. Everything in creation functions in its God-ordained purpose and is fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth. We see the revelation of this operating as children of God embodied in Christ. Jesus models perfect relationship with God as a human, without sin, and everywhere He goes He manifests the kingdom of God by destroying the works of sin in the earth that cause disease, natural and demonic oppression, wrong relationships, and ultimately death. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by faith in His work of grace toward us, we are released from the power of sin and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live like sons and daughters of God.

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

This final view would explain why humanity needs to be justified. We cannot live according to the standard set by God and modeled by Christ. Because it is impossible to live righteous lives, how can humanity ever hope to gain a right standing with God? The answer is simple: by being justified. The words “righteousness” and “justified” are spiritually linked in this epistle. Notice how the apostle clusters these words in these few verses: “Righteousness” (vv. 21, 22, 25, 26) is dikaiosune (dee-KIO-soonay) in the Greek. “Justified” (v. 24) is dikaioomenoi (dee-kio-AHMEN-oy), “just” (v. 26) is dikaios, “justifier” (v. 26) is dikaiou, and “justify” (v. 30) is dikaiousei. All the words share the same root dike (DEE-kay). To justify means to declare and treat as righteous. In other words, God says that we are righteous and then He treats us as if we had never sinned. Our sins are not merely forgiven or pardoned; they are wiped out! God declares us as righteous as Jesus Christ Himself. Our justification is accomplished through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The word “redemption” is from the Greek word apolutrosis (a-paul-oo-TROSEES), which means to deliver by paying a ransom. The word pictures a slave auction where people are held in bondage and are incapable of freeing themselves. Christ is portrayed as the one who sees our hopeless state and pays the ransom (Gk. lutron, LOO-trahn) for our freedom.

25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; 26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

The picture Paul calls to mind is that of the Exodus and being freed from the bondage of sin. It is in this context that Jesus institutes the Last Supper and becomes the ultimate Passover lamb instituting a new covenant in His blood. The thing Christ had to offer to cover this great price was His blood. When the Bible refers to blood, it means a life laid down in sacrifice (see Hebrews 9:7). In this case, “his blood” signifies the death of Christ by the shedding of His blood on the Cross. Since the life of the flesh is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11) and death is

the cost of sinfulness (Romans 6:23), then only the shedding of the blood of a sinless Savior could cover the cost of our redemption.

Why was the cost of our ransom so high? Why did Christ have to die on the Cross? The most readily available answer is that God demonstrated His love for us through the death of His only begotten Son (John 3:16). However, that was not the only purpose of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. The other reason was to declare God's righteousness in the remission of sins.

Why was it necessary for God to declare His righteousness? The phrase "for the remission of sin" is a translation of the Greek word *pareisis* (pa-RAY-sees), which means to overlook or suspend judgment. This explains how God dealt with sin before the sacrifice of Christ. God patiently tolerated the sins of the generations before Christ. As a result, God's holiness was called into question (Psalm 50:21). In order for God to show that He is righteous, He sent Christ to the Cross where He punished every sin—past, present, and future. This does not mean that God ignored sin in the Old Testament. It means that He did not deal with it fully and completely until Calvary. Christ's death on the Cross satisfied God's justice and frees us from the bondage of sin.

Christ thus became our propitiation. The actual Greek word for "propitiation" is *hilasterion* (hee-las-TAIR-ee-ahn). In secular Greek, *hilasterion* referred to sacrifices offered to pagan deities to appease their anger. However, this is not how Paul uses the word. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *hilasterion* is translated as "mercy seat" (see Hebrews 9:5). On the Day of Atonement, the high priest appeared before the Ark of the Covenant and poured blood from a sacrifice on the golden lid of the Ark called the mercy seat (Exodus 25:17–22). This act symbolized that sin, which separated God from His people, was cleansed through the shedding of blood. So the place of judgment, the mercy seat, became the place of mercy and reconciliation. The ritual pointed to Christ's sacrificial death where God's legitimate demands for justice against sinful humanity were fully met. Therefore, He is free to show mercy to those who formally were only worthy of judgment. Christ's shed blood as our propitiation (mercy seat) allows God to righteously punish sin and at the same time show mercy and treat repentant sinners as if they had never sinned. Christ, our propitiation, allows God to be both just and the justifier.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. 29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: 30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. 31 Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.

Since God provided everything necessary for our salvation, what did we do to earn our salvation that we can brag about? Paul answers the question with three short words, "it is excluded." There are two options available to anyone who wants to be reconciled to God. The first is justification by works. With this option, people earn their righteousness by living according to the Law. The problem comes when one aspect of the Law is violated—then the entire Law is violated (James 2:10). So one would have to live an absolutely perfect life in order to enjoy God's fellowship. The other option is to achieve righteousness apart from the deeds of the Law. Here people are justified by faith in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Does this void or nullify the Law? By no means; it establishes the Law by causing it to stand as a guide for human behavior. We are made righteous by faith in order that we might keep the commandments of God by His power rather than our own works.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God-Given Task for Workers
(Ecclesiastes 3:9–17)

TUESDAY

The Shepherd Lays Down His Life
(John 10:11–18)

WEDNESDAY

The Value of the Law
(Romans 7:7–12)

THURSDAY

The Purpose of the Law
(Galatians 3:19–29)

FRIDAY

God Is Faithful and Fair
(Romans 3:1–8)

SATURDAY

Jesus Brings True Justice
(Romans 3:9–20)

SUNDAY

All Called to Righteousness
(Romans 3:21–31)