

Romans 3:21-31

The Grounds of the Gospel

A Christian's lifestyle will be determined in large measure by his view of God. If he views God as a harsh judge standing over him with a club just waiting to beat him for getting out of line – then that Christian's walk with the Lord will be the walk of fear and dread. He'll be easily manipulated by guilt and his religion will be a source of bondage to him more than a source of blessing and strength.

On the other hand if he views God by the cultural norms around him then he'll see God as a laid back casual kind of being who loves everyone and in that love he is not overly concerned with what we do or don't do. After all, he'll reason, salvation is by grace. Therefore what difference does it make how I live as long as I believe in Christ? Oddly enough – Paul was accused of teaching this kind of gospel – cf. 3:7,8: *For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? 8 And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just.*

The saints at Corinth slipped into a mindset that abused the gospel this way. There was a member of their congregation that was guilty of the vilest sin – even by pagan standards and the church at Corinth was treating the matter as if it were nothing because salvation is by grace. In both of these cases grace is either denied or abused. And that denial or abuse springs from wrong ideas about God and about Christ.

If we would draw the greatest benefits from the gospel, then, and if we would walk in a way pleasing to God in the light of the gospel – if we would avoid legalism and/or easy-believism then it becomes very important for us to understand the gospel as it relates to the character of God.

The gospel, you see, is grounded in the character of God. And by that I mean that the basis of the gospel is found in the character of God. This brings us to our next point of analysis in our study of this portion of Romans 3. You'll recall what I've been saying in each of these studies – that in these last 11 verses of Romans 3 you find a very concise and yet comprehensive portion of Scripture when it comes to understanding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It would be very difficult to memorize the entire Bible – but it wouldn't be such a difficult task to memorize this portion of God's word. And by doing so you'll equip yourself to understand and appropriate the gospel – and you'll equip yourself to communicate the gospel to others.

We've studied these verses under two points of analysis so far. We've seen the universal need of the gospel. *For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God* – v. 23. And we've seen the nature of the gospel. It is righteous by nature and it is by grace through faith rather than by works.

Again let me emphasize the point that it's important to distinguish the nature of the gospel from the grounds of the gospel. Faith is the means to salvation – but faith is not the grounds for salvation. And if we can keep a clear distinction in our minds concerning the function of faith – then we'll go a long way toward fortifying ourselves in the gospel. I dare say that you'll never have to worry about being led astray into some cult or into some form of ecumenical apostasy as long as you can make the distinction between the means to salvation and the grounds upon which salvation is based.

To those who can't make such a distinction – they leave themselves easy prey for false religion – or easy prey for popular fads in religion. What then is the grounds upon which God can save sinners? Cf. 3:24-26. *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.*

From these verses we can see a 3-fold basis for salvation. Using the terms of the passage we can see that salvation is grounded in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Salvation is grounded in the penalty that Christ paid. Reference to that penalty is made through the use of the term *propitiation*. And in close connection with that penalty we can say that salvation is grounded in the justice that God demands. This is the meaning of *being justified freely by his grace*.

Let me take these terms in the reverse order in which I've just laid them before you in order to enlarge upon the truth that salvation is grounded in the character of God.

We've read from v. 24 that we're *justified* freely by his grace. One of the advantages to a little knowledge of Greek is that it enables a reader of the New Testament to see how closely related this term *justified* is to the term *righteousness* in vv. 21,22. They come from the same root word. You could say that the term *righteousness* is a noun and the term *justified* is a verb form of the same word.

And when you understand that connection then it makes it easier to see that salvation is grounded in the righteousness of God.

Rom. 1:16,17: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

Rom. 3:21 *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets*

We don't think of salvation nearly so much as grounded in the righteousness of God as we see it grounded in the love of God, or the mercy and grace of God.

And of course salvation is traceable to God's love – Rom. 5:8 *But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* And of course we understand salvation to be traceable to the grace of God – *by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves* – we read in Eph. 2:8.

But what you must understand – and again this brings us back to the issue of the character of God – what you must understand is that God will not – indeed God cannot manifest love, grace, or mercy at the expense of His justice. The genius of Divine wisdom is that God has devised a way to show His love and grace and mercy in a way that is consistent with His righteousness or His justice.

Some time ago when I was teaching the older children's Sunday School class – we were on the subject of the names of God. We read together a passage from Exodus in which you find God Himself manifesting His glory to Moses by passing by Moses, standing with Moses and proclaiming the name of the Lord – Exod. 34:5-7.

And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 6 And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, 7 Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.

We see within this name the various attributes of God. He's merciful and gracious. He's longsuffering and abundant in goodness and truth. He forgives iniquity and transgression and sin. But then you come across a statement in the proclamation of that name that seems to contradict the others. He keeps mercy for thousands and forgives iniquity and transgression and sin – but then look at the next statement – *and that will by no means clear the guilty.*

It seems on the surface of it that all that has been said is nullified by this statement. God forgives but then God will not clear which is the same as saying God will condemn the guilty. In the one instance men are forgiven – in the next instance they're condemned. Is this a contradiction?

And of course we know that there is no contradiction in the Bible – nor is there any contradiction in the character of God. The truth that we may deduce from this proclamation of God's name is that He will not manifest grace and mercy or forgiveness at the expense of His justice.

To suggest that He will is to impugn the character of God. And so you begin to appreciate the sense in which salvation was a challenge to God. How can guilty sinners be reconciled to a Holy God? How can defiled and rebellious fallen men escape the condemnation that God's justice demands?

Can God in mercy forsake His justice? Can God allow grace to come to the foreground and justice to be shut in the closet, as it were? Some may present the gospel in such a way

as to suggest this to be the case. But you remember what I said in our first study about the universal need of the gospel?

Even sinners that have never heard the gospel – or have never heard the law – nevertheless know that God will do right – that God is the judge of all the universe and that God won't compromise His own character. To do so would make Him something less than God. And if the gospel is presented in such a way as to suggest that God will suppress His justice in order to demonstrate grace and mercy that kind of gospel will carry no credibility to the sinner's heart – because he possesses that intuitive knowledge in his heart that God won't compromise His righteousness.

The challenge, then, that faced God once He set His mind and heart on the sinner's salvation was the challenge of reconciling grace and mercy with truth and justice. And it's a challenge that God has taken and has met. This brings us to the next term in the verses we're focusing on today.

In v. 25 we read – *Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.* We need to pay attention to that term *propitiation*. This is the term that serves to explain the challenge that God faced in the matter of His justice. This term makes reference to the fact that when Christ was nailed to Calvary's cross – He was bearing the wrath of God.

He was manifesting the truth of what was pictured in all those Old Testament animal sacrifices. There were various kinds of offerings – sin offerings, trespass offerings, burnt offerings, peace offerings. They all bore something in common. An animal was slain and was burnt on the altar. The burnt offering in particular was designed to picture the flames of God's wrath consuming the sacrifice. The idea of substitution was taught in those sacrifices. The one offering the sacrifice was asking God to charge the sins of the offerer to the animal. And once his sins were transferred to the lamb, or bullock, or whatever – then that animal would picture the judgement of God by the flames consuming that animal.

All these offerings, I say, were designed to point us to Christ until the time came that Christ Himself came and presented Himself to be the sacrifice for the sins of those He represented. During that agonizing time when He was nailed to that tree – we read of a time of darkness that came prematurely upon that scene. It was as if God was drawing a curtain across the scene of time and from behind that curtain something took place that is beyond our ability to comprehend.

God's wrath was unleashed upon His Son. It's as if God could gather up the flames of hell into a giant ball and unleash those flames upon His Son. And such was the power of Christ in His death that He could outlast and outlive those flames until at last He could proclaim – *It is finished.* And when He made such a proclamation it indicated that God's justice was satisfied. The flames had been extinguished.

I've heard Dr. Paisley draw the contrast between those animal sacrifices and the sacrifices of Christ. In the animal sacrifices the sacrifice was consumed by the flames. In Christ's sacrifice the flames were consumed by the sacrifice. And so God's justice was

satisfied because the penalty for the broken law was paid by One who was designated to represent those who would put their trust in Him.

And so we can and we must affirm that God will forgive iniquity and transgression and sin – but He will not clear the guilty. There must be condemnation for sin – but the good news of the gospel is that there has been condemnation wrought for sin. Christ has been condemned for sin. Christ has been made sin. *For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*

This means, then, that justice doesn't have to be suppressed – justice doesn't have to be shut in the closet so that grace and mercy can come to the foreground. No – the two things are completely compatible with each other. There's a verse in Psalm 85 that expresses this glorious truth of the attributes of God coming together in harmonious accord for the sinner's salvation. In Psalm 85:10 we read *Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

When did mercy and truth meet? What does it mean that mercy and truth met? We're talking about the truth that God is just and holy. We're talking about the truth that man is defiled and condemned. Where did these truths come together with mercy? They came together at the cross where Christ became the propitiation for our sins.

This is why we can be assured that our salvation will endure. Christ is the propitiation for our sins. The devil will tempt you to think that God is growing weary of giving you grace. Here God has forgiven you of so much and yet you still fall short of His glory – you still transgress His laws – you still fail to measure up to all that His law demands. Don't you think God is getting tired of forgiving you? Don't you think that at some point mercy has to give way to justice and God will have to deal with you for your sins?

The devil will do all he can to convince you that God's grace can expire. But if you understand that your salvation is grounded in the righteousness of Christ's atoning death then the devil's leverage over you will be forever broken. He can't use the leverage of God's justice over you because God's justice is for you. God's justice indeed demands your acceptance.

If I could borrow from another picture that Dr. Paisley once painted. He called upon his hearers to picture justice personified before God. Justice looks upon you and me and then says to God – *if you would be just you must condemn those sinners.* God then makes the observation that the sinner seems to be trying hard to keep the law – but justice still says – *they come short of the demands of justice. In spite of their best efforts they have not met the requirements of your justice. It you would be true to yourself – true to your own character – true to your justice those sinners must be condemned.*

But then the sinner applies to Christ by faith for salvation – the sinner acknowledges that he comes short of the glory of God and that he deserves to be condemned. That confession can't save him based on any merit in the confession. He's simply acknowledging what is true. But when he makes the blood of Christ his plea for salvation then justice must reverse its role from adversary to advocate. Justice now demands that the sinner be accepted.

Justice demands that the sinner be received into heaven and that he be given everlasting life. *If you would be true to your righteous character, justice says, then you must receive that sinner for the penalty for his sins have been paid and you cannot demand payment from him that you've already received from your Son. If you would be true to your Son you must accept that sinner.*

And so justice aligns itself with the sinner because there is – thanks to Christ – a just basis for God to receive him. I've referred to the verse many times in 1John – a verse that every Christian learns early on in his walk with the Lord – *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* We know that God will keep on forgiving because He is faithful and just. He'll continue to forgive because forgiving is the right and just thing for Him to do on account of Christ's shed blood.

Do you begin to see, then, the genius of Divine wisdom and the greatness of Divine love? I love the stanza in the hymn that says:

Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan! Oh, the grace that brought it down to man! Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary.

Because we understand that God's justice has been satisfied we can rest and be at peace. Paul teaches us this when he says in Rom. 5:1 – *Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God.*

There is a third term in our section in Romans 3 that I'll only touch upon briefly. We read in v. 24 that we're *justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Our salvation is grounded in the truth that Christ made redemption by the shedding of His blood. In other words He purchased to Himself those that would believe in Him. Now you know that when you purchase an item from a store – that item belongs to you. You've paid for it. No one else can lay claim to that which you've purchased. And if the item that you've purchased was very costly – then you would be very jealous for the care of that item. You would guard it. You would protect it. You would do all in your power to keep it secure.

And when Christ bore God's wrath for believers – when Christ became the propitiation for their sins – He purchased them to Himself and He paid a very high price for them – the price of His own blood.

Our salvation, therefore, is grounded in the truth that you have become God's purchased possession. You weren't intrinsically valuable at all. In fact your righteousness was no more valuable than filthy rags according to the prophet Isaiah.

But how your value rose when God purchased you to Himself by the blood of His Son. And because He's paid such a high price for you – He values you very highly. He'll never let you go – you belong to Him. You can be assured, therefore, that you are secure in Him by virtue of redemption.

All these things, of course, give us great cause for exulting in Christ. We glory in what Christ has done. We marvel that Christ would be willing to come to represent us. What grace that the very Son of God would leave heaven's glory to come to this sin cursed world to become one of us. What love and mercy that He would keep the law for us that we've failed to keep and then pay the penalty for us that we could never pay apart from everlasting condemnation.

I trust that as you see the character of God in the gospel you'll be moved to praise and thanksgiving and that you'll humbly walk with Him in the joy of salvation with that peace that passes understanding. There is good grounds for our joy and peace. They're grounded in the person and work of Christ.