

Romans: The Good News of God

How to Be Right with God (Part 3)

Romans 3:22b-25a

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Scripture

A Sunday school teacher was testing the children in her kindergarten class to see if they understood the concept of getting in to heaven.

She asked them, “If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?”

“No!” the children answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?”

Again, the answer was, “No!”

By now she was starting to smile. Hey, this was fun! “Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave candy to all the children, and loved my husband, would that get me into heaven?” she asked.

Again, they all answered, “No!”

She was just bursting with pride for them. “Well,” she continued, “then how can I get into heaven?”

A five-year-old boy shouted out, “You gotta be dead!”

We smile at the little boy’s answer. But, do you know that many people in our culture think like that? When some well-known person dies, people say that he or she is in heaven—simply because he or she died!

I think it was theologian R. C. Sproul who said that today people believe that the requirement for entry into heaven is no longer justification by faith but rather justification by death!

So, how does someone get into heaven? Well, it is not simply by dying.

We need the righteousness of God in order to get into heaven. And how do we get that? That is what the Apostle Paul explains in our text for today, which is Romans 3:21-25a:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ **for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.** (Romans 3:21-25a)

Introduction

In our text for today the Apostle Paul answers the question, “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2b). And he makes as clear as he possibly can that it is not our work—our righteousness—that makes us right before God. But rather, it is the righteousness of God that makes us right before God.

In order to help us understand Romans 3:21-25a I am using material from John MacArthur. In Romans 3:21-25a Paul gives us seven elements of the righteousness that God divinely gives to those who trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. This righteousness is:

1. apart from the law (3:21a),
2. built on revelation (3:21b),
3. received through faith (3:22a),
4. provided for all who believe (3:22b-23),
5. given by grace as a gift (3:24a),
6. accomplished through redemption (3:24b), and
7. paid by propitiation (3:25a).

Review

Let’s review the first three elements of God’s righteousness.

I. Righteousness Is Apart from the Law (3:21a)

First, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a). The Apostle Paul says

in Romans 3:21a: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from the law.**”

Except for the introduction (1:1-18), this letter so far has portrayed an utterly dark picture of our sin and hopelessness apart from God. Now, after backing all sinful mankind, Jew and Greek alike, into the totally dark and seemingly inescapable corner of God’s wrath (1:18-3:20), Paul begins to open the window of divine grace that lets in the glorious light of salvation through the righteousness that God himself has provided.

First of all, Paul says, the righteousness that God grants to all Christians is **apart from the law.** That is, not one of us can perfectly obey the law of God and therefore meet his perfect standard. And so the righteousness that we need to get in to heaven is something that God himself gives to us. It is in fact the perfect righteousness of Jesus that God credits to us. It is Jesus’ righteousness alone that is acceptable to God.

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a).

II. Righteousness Is Built on Revelation (3:21b)

Second, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is built on revelation (3:21b). Paul says in Romans 3:21: “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, **although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it.**”

The phrase “**the Law and the Prophets**” was a phrase used to encompass all of God’s written Word, what we now call the Old Testament. In other words, Paul was not speaking about a *new* kind of righteousness but about *God’s* righteousness that is spoken of throughout the Old Testament.

Not only do **the Law and the Prophets** proclaim God’s perfect righteousness, but they affirm what Paul has just stated—that, without exception, we are unable to achieve that righteousness in our strength or power.

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), and built on revelation (3:21b).

III. Righteousness Is Received through Faith (3:22a)

Third, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is received through faith (3:22a). We read in Romans 3:22a: **“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ. . . .”**

To avoid any possible misunderstanding, Paul mentions again that he is speaking of the perfect **righteousness of God**, not the imperfect righteousness of human achievement.

Paul’s point here is that the perfect, saving **righteousness of God**, not only is received apart from the law and built on revelation, but also is received *only* through **faith**. That has always been the only way of salvation as far as our part is concerned.

That is also a repeated theme of Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 4:5 he says, “And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

And in Romans 4:13 he says, “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith” (cf. 4:20).

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), and received through faith (3:22a).

Lesson

Today, I want to continue with the next four elements that Paul gives in Romans 3:21-25a concerning the righteousness that God divinely grants to those who trust in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let’s look at each in turn.

IV. Righteousness Is Provided for All Who Believe (3:22b-23)

Fourth, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is provided for all who believe (3:22b-23). The Apostle Paul says in Romans 3:22b-23: “. . . 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. . . .**”

The provision of salvation and the righteousness that it brings is granted **for all who believe**. Anyone will be saved who believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, for **there is no distinction**.

Preaching in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, the Apostle Paul declared that “by him [i.e., Jesus] everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38b-39).

In his letter to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul said, “Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16a).

Jesus himself said, “And whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (John 6:37b).

Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ—whether a murderer, prostitute, thief, rapist, homosexual, religious hypocrite, false teacher, pagan, or anything else—will be saved. Just as no one is good enough to be saved, so no one is so evil that he cannot be saved.

That is the wonderful point of Romans 3:22. **All who believe** will be saved, because in God’s sight **there is no distinction**. Just as everyone apart from Christ is equally sinful and rejected by God, everyone who is in Christ is equally righteous and accepted by him. Even the “worst” of sinners, as Paul called himself (1 Timothy 1:15), is not too wicked to be saved.

There is no distinction among those who are being saved, because **there is no distinction** among those who are lost, **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**. The Greek word for “**fall short**” (*hustereo*) has the basic meaning of being last or

inferior. Every one of us comes in last as far as **the glory of God** is concerned.

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), received through faith (3:22a), and provided for all who believe (3:22b-23).

V. Righteousness Is Given by Grace as a Gift (3:24a)

Fifth, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is given by grace as a gift (3:24a). Paul says in Romans 3:24: “**And [we] are justified by his grace as a gift. . . .**”

No one is ahead of anyone else as far as salvation is concerned. The term **justified** refers back to the “alls” of the previous two verses—*all* those who have believed, of whom *all* were sinful. Just as there is no distinction among those who need salvation, there is no distinction among those who receive it, because all **are justified by his grace**.

The Greek word for **justified** (*dikaioo*) means “to declare the rightness of something or someone.” Justification is God’s declaration that all the demands of his law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Justification is a forensic, or legal, transaction. It changes the judicial *standing* of the sinner before God. In justification, God *imputes* the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ to the believer’s account, then declares the redeemed one fully righteous.

Justification must be distinguished from sanctification, in which God actually *imparts* Christ’s righteousness to the sinner.

But while the two must be distinguished, justification and sanctification can never be separated. God does not justify whom he does not sanctify.

Yet God justifies believers **by his grace as a gift**, not because of any good thing in the one who is justified.

By definition, **grace** is **a gift**, unearned and unmerited by the recipient. God’s greatest of all gifts is that of salvation though his

Son, Jesus Christ, given completely by his divine **grace**. “For if justification were through the law,” that is, through human accomplishment of God’s divine standard, then “Christ died for no purpose” (Galatians 2:21).

Last week Eileen and I attended the Capital Stewardship banquet of Redeemer PCA in Riverview, FL. Ray Cortese was the speaker and he gave the following illustration of grace.

Suppose you were extremely wealthy, and you have only one teenage son. One day your son is killed by one of his delinquent friends as the result of an argument. Naturally, you grieve the loss of your son. Your son’s friend is apprehended and is put in prison. After a few weeks, you go down to the jail and you extend forgiveness to your son’s killer. Would that be grace?

Yes, it would. It is an act of unmerited favor on your part. But that is not fully God’s grace.

Suppose that some time later you go down to the jail again and you pay the bail bond to get your son’s killer out of jail. Would that be grace?

Yes, it would. It is an act of unmerited favor on your part. But that is not fully God’s grace.

Suppose you now invite your son’s killer to come and live in your home. You feed him, clothe him, give him your son’s bedroom, adopt him, and give him your name. Not only that, you name him as the sole recipient of your entire inheritance, which was your son’s. Now, is that grace?

Yes, it would. It is an act of unmerited favor on your part. But that is not yet fully God’s grace.

But now suppose that you go down to the jail and offer to spend the rest of your life in prison because that is the sentence that is handed to your son’s killer. Would that be grace?

Ray Cortese said that when he first shared that illustration with his congregation one woman shouted out, “That’s ridiculous!” And Ray said, “I knew then that she got it!”

You see, it is absolutely ridiculous that God should extend his unmerited favor to sinners. He does it as an act of grace.

The law reveals God's righteousness and exposes our unrighteousness. **Grace**, on the other hand, not only reveals God's righteousness but actually *gives* his righteousness to those who trust in his Son. That gift of God's **grace** cost God the suffering and death of his own Son on the cross, so that, for the believer, there is nothing left to pay.

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), received by faith (3:22a), provided for all who believe (3:22b-23), and given by grace as a gift (3:24a).

VI. Righteousness Is Accomplished through Redemption (3:24b)

Sixth, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is accomplished through redemption (3:24b). Paul says in Romans 3:24: "And [we] are justified by his grace as a gift, **through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**"

The Greek word for **redemption** (*apolutrosis*) is a strengthened form of *lutrosis*, which carries the idea of delivering, especially by means of paying a price. It was commonly used of paying a ransom to free a prisoner from his captors or paying the price to free a slave from his master.

Because of our utter sinfulness and inability to bring ourselves up to the standard of God's righteousness, **the redemption** of sinners could only come **in Christ Jesus**. Only the sinless Savior could pay the price to redeem sinful men and women.

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), received by faith (3:22a), provided for all who believe (3:22b-23), given by grace as a gift (3:24a), and accomplished through redemption (3:24b).

VII. Righteousness Was Paid by Propitiation (3:25a)

Seventh, and finally, the righteousness that God divinely

grants is a righteousness that was paid by propitiation (3:25a). Paul says in Romans 3:25a: “. . . **whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.**”

Because we cannot become righteous on our own, God graciously provided for our redemption through the atoning sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus Christ.

That sacrifice was not made in the dark or even in the hidden and holy recesses of the sacred Temple, but openly on the hill of Calvary for all the world to see. **God put forward** his own Son, Jesus Christ, **as a propitiation by his blood.**

The Greek word for **propitiation** (*hilasterion*) carries the basic idea of appeasement, or satisfaction. In ancient pagan religions, as in many religions today, the idea of man's appeasing a deity by various gifts or sacrifices was common. But in the New Testament **propitiation** always refers to the work of God, not of man. Man is utterly incapable of satisfying God's justice except by spending eternity in hell.

The only satisfaction, or **propitiation**, that could be acceptable to God and that could reconcile him to man had to be made by God. For that reason, God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6). He appeased the wrath of God.

That ransoming **propitiation** made by Christ was paid **by his** own divine **blood**. To believers scattered throughout the Roman Empire, Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:18-19: “Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”

The Hebrew equivalent of **propitiation** is used in the Old Testament in reference to the Mercy Seat in the Holy of Holies, where the high priest went once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to make a sacrifice on behalf of his people. On that occasion he sprinkled blood on the Mercy Seat, symbolizing the payment of the penalty for his own sins and the sins of the people.

But that yearly act, although divinely prescribed and hon-

ored, had no power to remove or pay for a single sin. It could only point to the true and effective “offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:10, 14).

So, the righteousness that God divinely grants is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a), built on revelation (3:21b), received by faith (3:22a), provided for all who believe (3:22b-23), given by grace as a gift (3:24a), accomplished through redemption (3:24b), and paid by propitiation (3:25a).

Conclusion

In his beautiful hymn, Horatius Bonar wrote:

Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.

Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
No other work, save thine,
No other blood will do;
No strength, save that which is divine
Can bear me safely through.

Let us not place our trust in our own righteousness, which Isaiah tells us is like a “polluted garment” in the sight of God (Isaiah 64:6), but let us trust in the righteousness of God. It is that righteousness alone that will get us safely to heaven. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

This (modified) prayer is from *A Passion for God* by Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr.:

O God and Father, this is too profound for us to understand fully and yet too inviting for us to turn away.

You do not forgive us by overlooking your law. Instead, the cross liberates your love by enforcing your law. Your justice has been satisfied.

You have taken our guilt and put it onto Christ at the cross, where he suffered in our place the penalty our guilt deserved. And you have taken his righteousness and credited it to us, paying our moral debt in full forever.

This mysterious exchange, our sin for his merit, is the wonder of free justification at the cross.

O Father, how are we to respond?

All we can do is bow before you in quiet adoration and wonder.

O just Judge and gracious Savior, we do whisper our poor love back to you!

Receive our worship now, for we offer it to you through the infinite merit of Christ.

In his holy name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.