

# Christ, The Righteousness of God

*Cleaning the Debt*

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Well, I'm glad to be here again this evening in worship and to preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and we read the word of God in the book of Romans and chapter 3. Romans and chapter 3. The book of Romans chapter 3 and we read from the beginning.

1 What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? 2 Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. 3 For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? 4 God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. 5 But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man) 6 God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world? 7 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. 9 What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; 10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: 11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. 12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. 13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: 14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: 15 Their feet are swift to shed blood: 16 Destruction and misery are in their ways: 17 And the way of peace have they not known: 18 There is no fear of God before their eyes. 19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. 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.

Thus far we read the word of God and we seek God's blessing upon it.

If we turn to verse 26, "To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." Our theme this evening is "Christ, The Righteousness of God." Christ, the righteousness of God. We saw last night from chapter 1 and verse 16 to 18 that the gospel of Christ comes from God. It is this gospel alone through which God's saving power comes to sinners, and this gospel is the means in the hand of God of bringing sinners to faith in Jesus Christ and in this gospel there is made known God's provided righteousness in Christ for unrighteous sinners. That's why in chapter 1, verse 17, we read, "For therein," that is, in the gospel, "is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." And then the apostle shows the need that all have as sinners of a righteousness that is reckoned to their account, reckoned to the account of those who believe in Jesus because by nature we are all unrighteous. So verse 18 of chapter 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness," who hold or hold down the truth in unrighteousness.

So the gospel makes known to sinners God's provided righteousness in Jesus Christ which is imputed to every sinner, reckoned to the account of every sinner who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ. We remember that the word "impute" means "to reckon to the account of," and all that the Lord Jesus did in keeping God's law and in bearing the punishment of its transgression, all of that is reckoned to the account of those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And this God-provided righteousness for sinners is taken up again here in chapter 3 and in verse 21, "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets," that in Christ is made known to men that God-provided righteousness which Christ wrought out in his sinless life and his bearing the guilt of sin, and that same righteousness is reckoned to the account of all sinners who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. So in verse 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: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

Well, now as we look at this passage this evening, let's look at the broader setting. First of all, all are condemned without this God-provided righteousness. All are condemned without this God-provided righteousness. Every sinner who is not in Christ, who is not a true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and who does not have the righteousness of Christ reckoned to his account, all such sinners stand condemned before God because we are all by nature sinners and guilty before God. We mentioned last night that the apostle speaks for nearly two chapters here showing that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. In chapter 1 from verse 19 to the end, he shows that the Gentiles are all sinners. In chapter 2, he shows that the Jews are all sinners as well. And in chapter 3, verse 9, he reaches the conclusion, "What then? are we better than they?" Are we Jews better than they, the Gentiles? "No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." And then he confirms that from the Old Testament scriptures, verse 10, "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one."

Now what does this mean? It means, firstly, the openly unrighteous are condemned before God. The openly unrighteous, those idolaters, and immoral, and violent men that are described in chapter 1, and the things that were done among the Gentiles; those who are openly unrighteous stand condemned and under the wrath of God. And the Apostle Paul in another place in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 10 he says, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God." The openly ungodly, the openly rebellious, the openly immoral shall not inherit the kingdom of God. They are condemned, guilty before God, that is unless the Lord changes them and brings them to faith in Christ.

But then we may also learn that religious men and women are condemned before God, that without Christ religious men and women are condemned before God. In chapter 2 and verse 17, speaking of the Jews he says, "Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?" And so on. He's addressing the Jews. They were religious outwardly, very religious many of them, and yet without Christ, without this God-provided righteousness imputed to them, reckoned to their account, without that they were guilty before God.

Those who rely on their church privileges are condemned before God. Verse 28 of chapter 2, "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of

God." The Jews had the sign of circumcision, it was a sign, an outward sign of that cleansing from sin which is to be found in Christ. In the Old Testament, Christ was spoken of in the prophecies of the word of God and circumcision was a sign of cleansing from sin that was to be had by trusting in the Savior yet to come. But many of the Jews, especially by this time, they trusted not in the Savior who had been promised in the Old Testament but in the sign and in all the other outward God-given ordinances of his worship, and indeed many of their own additions as well. They thought, "We've got circumcision. We've got the ordinances of God. We've got the ceremonies. We've got the scriptures. We've got the commands of God. If we adhere to these things, then we will be accepted with God." But the apostle says they're not, that their confidence in these things was misplaced, that they trusted in these ordinances which pointed to Christ but they didn't put their trust in the Christ to whom they pointed. They thought that their outward form of religion would make them accepted with God.

Now although the form of worship has changed in the New Testament, yet many do the same thing today. This misplaced confidence in outward religious forms, even right ones, never mind wrong ones, is misplaced. And so there are many today who trust in their baptism and yet they are not washed from their sin and guilt, they do not trust in the Savior, or they take Communion and yet they use that taking of the Lord's Supper, the Communion service, as part of their self-righteousness and they actually abuse it as a declaration that they don't actually need the Christ who is set forth in it. The Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine speak of Christ, the Savior, the Redeemer whose body was broken and blood shed to take away the guilt of sin, and yet sinners in their arrogance and pride make their partaking of it a brick, as it were, a part of their self-righteousness whereby they pretend that they don't actually need this Savior. And perhaps that's true of you, and perhaps you go to church, or at least you have your name on a church roll somewhere, and you think, "Oh, it must be well. I'm a decent person. I don't do my neighbor any harm, in fact, I do them a good turn if I can. I go to church, or at least I belong to church. I'm connected with church. I was baptized. And that will do." But you see, it won't. You can do all of those things and still go to hell, and if that's all you have, these outward activities and church connections, if that's all you have, but if that's all you ever have, you will go to hell. The question is are you enrolled in heaven? Are you like those very religious Jews to whom Christ said, "For I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you"?

"There is none righteous, no, not one." Not you. Not anyone else but, secondly, we must see our own unrighteousness. We must see our own unrighteousness. Here in this chapter 3, verse 20 of Romans, we read, "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." He says not only can we not earn our way into acceptance with God but God's law, God's commands, God's standards, God's declaration of right and wrong summed up in the 10 Commandments, it actually shows us that we're sinners. It shows us our need of Christ. You see, if you think that by keeping God's commands you can earn your way into acceptance with God, then you have not understood God's commands because when we understand God's law, when we understand the 10 Commandments and the implications of them, what it shows us is that

we're sinners. It shows us we're guilty. It shows us we deserve to be damned. And it shows us that we need the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The law of God is like a mirror. We can think ourselves dressed in clean clothes until we look in the mirror and see just how filthy they are. It shows us when properly understood that we're sinners. That's what it means when the apostle says, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin." In Isaiah we read, "for all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." Have you learned that? Have you understood that? Have you been convinced of that? Because if not, you see, you're still on that broad road that leads to destruction, you're still guilty before God. You haven't Christ. You haven't forgiveness. You haven't peace with God. But perhaps you say, "Oh, that can't be true. I do keep the 10 Commandments." You really think you keep the 10 Commandments but the 10 Commandments, even if you kept them outwardly, the 10 Commandments properly understood bear upon the thoughts and the intentions of the heart. The Lord Jesus explains the 10 Commandments in Matthew 5 in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. He opens up one or two of them and shows that the Pharisees with their idea that if they outwardly kept them that would do the job, that they did not understand them at all.

In Matthew 5:27 he gives one example, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." He's saying that the thought even if it never comes to actual action, the thought is sinful; to have that malice in our hearts is to break the sixth commandment; to have immoral thoughts in our hearts is to break the seventh commandment; to have greedy, selfish, covetous thoughts is to break the tenth commandment as well as the eighth.

But let's just expand on this. For most of us, it's a lot of years ago since we learned to talk. When we were very small and we learned to talk, think of all the words we've spoken since we first began to form words. But God has heard all our words. Thousands, thousands of words. The scripture says, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin," there's no lack of sin in the multitude of words and God has heard them all and he will hold us to account for every single one of them. But what about our thoughts? If our words are vast in number, what about our thoughts? Many of our thoughts don't express themselves even in words, let alone actions. But the Lord Jesus Christ is saying that God weighs the thoughts. Those thoughts that have passed through the mind, you've forgotten all about them now but God hasn't. He's seen them all. The eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good. Those thoughts that you would be ashamed even for your own family to know about them, well, God does know about them.

All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We can all pass the test if we make the rules, but as we said yesterday God isn't interested in our standards. Our standards are the standards set by our sinful selves. Why do sinners not see that they're sinners? Well, because they are sinners. It's part of our sinfulness to pretend that God's standards are the same as ours but they're not. Saul of Tarsus who became the Apostle Paul, before he was converted to Christ he was a Pharisee, he was a very religious man and he thought he was doing rather well but then look what happened in this book of Romans. He tells us

something of his experience in Romans 7:7, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence," all manner of sinful desires. "For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Now what's he saying there? He's saying this: he thought he was doing quite well as a Pharisee, that he was pretty righteous and that God really ought to be pretty well impressed with his achievement, but that's before he began to understand God's law. He knew God's law, as a Pharisee he knew the content of the Old Testament better than we do, but then he began to understand it. This command, "Thou shalt not covet," that means it's not just a question of regulating outward behavior and holding it all in, as it were, but even sinful desire, even to desire what the commandment forbids is sin against God. And he says that, "The law came and sin revived and I died." He says the law showed him he was a sinner, in fact, the effect of knowing the commands of God was that sin revived. He's saying there that so sinful are we by nature that the more we understand that God forbids something, the more our sinful nature is stirred up to want it.

That's how bad we are. It's like a stagnant pond, the smell isn't that bad until you prod it and poke it, until you disturb it, and then the fumes come off. He says that's what his heart was like as a Pharisee, as a religious man, but when he began to understand what God's law, God's commands really meant, he saw that he was a sinner but far from stopping him sinning, he wanted what he was forbidden all the more. Why are we laboring this? You say, "I thought the gospel, I thought that meant good news?" And so it does but you'll never see it as good news until you face up to the bad news we are sinners, we are guilty, we do deserve damnation.

Thirdly, the cross shows that God is just. The cross of Christ shows that God is just. Verse 24 of Romans 3, "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 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; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus." Does God always punish sin? Does God punish every sin? The apostle is speaking about in the Old Testament there were sins that were not obviously punished, in fact, there were sins that were forgiven. How were they forgiven? How do we know that God is committed to punishing sin, every sin, all of sin? By the cross of Jesus Christ, that's how we know. That cross declares to us that God is just, God is righteous, that no sin is ultimately unpunished. Those who were forgiven in the Old Testament, those who are forgiven in the New Testament are forgiven on the basis of the cross of Jesus Christ because when the Lord Jesus suffered on the cross, it wasn't because everything had gone wrong and a tragic mistake. It was God showing his justice, his righteousness because the Lord Jesus Christ was a propitiation, that means one who bears away wrath. He was bearing the wrath of God. What for, he had no sin? Because he came as the Savior to bear the guilt of sin, and the cross of Christ tells us God does punish sin.

Those who are saved by Christ, Christ bore the punishment. Those who are not saved by Christ will bear the punishment themselves forever in hell. But no sin, no sin will ultimately go unpunished. Not one. And there are two places where God fully punishes sin. One is hell where those who are not saved by Christ will surely go, and the other is the cross where Christ, the substitute of sinners, was bearing the wrath of God in their place, and all sin is punished by God either in Christ or in hell. The picture we've often used is of a forest fire. If a forest is on fire and the wind is blowing the flames, the safe place to be is on the burnt ground because on the burnt ground everything that can be burned has been burned. There's nothing left. Those who are true believers in the Lord Jesus, they're on the burnt ground. The wrath of God has been there and it will not come again.

Why did the Lord Jesus come? Why did he suffer and die? It was not a mistake. He said, "For this cause came I unto this hour." How do we explain Christ's heaviness and sorrow when he said, "I am exceeding sorrowful unto death"? Why in the garden of Gethsemane was he in an agony so that he shed, as it were, great drops of blood and said, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done"? You say, "Because he was going to suffer an agonizing death." That's true but it doesn't explain it. So great was the anguish and agony of Christ at the prospect of the cross that we're told in Luke's gospel that there appeared an angel of God to strengthen him, that is, to strengthen his physical body because the prospect of what lay before him was so terrible that his physical body, that true human body that belonged to him, and the horror of his soul was so great that he had to be physically sustained in order to go through with it. Was it only the terrible physical sufferings that caused that horror to come upon Christ? No. There are Christians who have faced great physical sufferings with joy. There was more, more than the physical sufferings. He was to be the substitute of sinners and to suffer not only in his body, horrific though those sufferings were, he was to suffer in his soul, the Father was to hide his face, the comforts of the Spirit upon his human soul were removed. He cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And that's why in this passage it speaks of Christ's death as a propitiation. He bore the wrath of God in his physical sufferings and in his soul.

A propitiation, a bearing away of wrath, that's why Christ came, to bear the just judgment of God, to take the debt of sin, the debt to the justice of God upon himself in the place of his people and that brings us, fourthly, the cross shows the love of God. The cross shows the love of God. It declares God's righteousness, that God is just and does punish sin, but it also shows the love of God because, you see, the text says, verse 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 justifier, what does that mean? That God is just, we understand that, he punishes sin, but he is the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus, what is a justifier, what is justification? Well, it's the opposite of condemnation. That's why in chapter 8 of this book, verse 33, the apostle says, "It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth?" If God justifies, who can condemn? Justification and condemnation are the opposites. If a judge pronounces a guilty verdict, that's condemnation. If he pronounces a not guilty verdict, that's justification. It's declaring someone not guilty. It's declaring them righteous in terms of the law. And God is the final judge. If God condemns you, there's

no hope. If God justifies us, then no one can condemn. There is no Court of Appeal. There is no appeal court beyond God. His verdict is final. It's his verdict that counts. It doesn't matter what everybody else thinks, it doesn't matter if everyone else says, "You're fine as you are." It's what God declares and without Christ you are under condemnation but our text tells us that so great is the love and mercy and kindness of God that those who trust in Jesus Christ, though deserving of condemnation forever, because Christ is the propitiation, the one who bore the wrath of God in the place of the guilty, the one who bore the punishment, all who in every generation trust in him are justified, declared not guilty. Because God is gracious, he is a just God and a Savior, he has made known his righteousness and his salvation.

This is the love of God. His people can say this with the Apostle John, 1 John 4:10, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." There's that word again, the propitiation, the bearer-away of wrath. Unbelieving churchmen, they tell us, "We don't believe in hell because we believe in a God of love." But they know nothing of the love of God. Nothing. Because the love of God is supremely displayed in the giving of his Son to bear the just judgment of God upon sin as the propitiation, as the sin-bearer, the substitute of guilty sinners. This is the love of God. Deny hell and you'll never understand the love of God. Not a hope. It's because there is a hell that Christ coming to redeem sinners and to take them to heaven by bearing the just judgment of God, this is the love of God in its glory and in its greatness.

He is just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. Well, what is it to believe in Jesus? Perhaps you say, "Well, I could see that, Christ as substitute, but what is it to believe in Jesus?" It is to come to God knowing that you have no right whatsoever to be accepted in yourself, and that you are utterly unable to reduce or take away your guilt before God, and that you know that God justly holds you guilty, and that you rightly deserve to go to hell, but you come seeking acceptance only, only on the basis of what Christ has done on behalf of sinners, because he did not sin and he bore the guilt of sin, and God promises that all who come to him trusting in his Son, the substitute, the sin-bearer, he will accept them, he will take all their sins away as far as the east is from the west, he will forgive their iniquities, he will justify them, he will declare them not guilty in his sight. You must come to God in this way, trusting only in Christ and what he has done as your only hope and ground of acceptance with God, and say to God, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." You must turn from all false hopes. You must abandon all refuge of lies. If you've been saying in your heart, "God isn't really the God of judgment. He's not so holy and strict as to punish sin." Or if you've been saying, "Well, I know I'm not perfect but I'm not seriously sinful. God shouldn't really take account of my little shortcomings." Or if you've been thinking that you can make amends for the sins of the past, in other words, if you've been denying your true condition, your true guilt and the truth of God as just and holy and a God who does punish sin, you must give up those lies and you must turn to the God of truth, the God who justifies and declares not guilty every sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ alone.



Come to God. Come to God the way God says you must come, through the Mediator Jesus Christ, the one who never sinned, the one who bore the punishment of sin, the one who can make sinners accepted with God. Come to God through Jesus Christ and seek forgiveness from God where he says it can be found, through his Son Jesus Christ. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good and blessed is the man that trusteth in him. Amen.