

By Grace Alone

Romans

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

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Bible Text: Romans 3:21-26
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First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Our gracious God and Father, we bask in the knowledge of your grace. We thank you for the ways in which you have displayed it to us in your providential kindness in our lives, for the marvelous expressions of it in your word, for the assurance you have given us that where sin abounded, grace has abounded all the more. We pray tonight as we come afresh to the word of Jesus Christ and to Christ himself as our teacher and our preacher and leader, we pray that he will once more send his Holy Spirit upon us, that he will anoint our understanding of your word, that he will touch our minds and illumine them by its truth, that he will subdue our wills that we may be eager to hear what you have to say to us, that he will touch our affections and that they may be raised and exalted on high in adoration and worship and praise to you, the God of infinite and marvelous grace. So, we look to you for your word this evening. We pray that you would fill us out of its fullness and teach us from its truth. This we pray, with the forgiveness of our sins that our lives may be impacted and transformed by your word and changed more and more into the likeness of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Please be seated.

We've come again in our readings in Romans 3, to verses 21-26. We have made our way over these past months since mid-August through the first three chapters of Romans. We've done so fairly quickly really. It may have seemed very slow to you but by comparison with the sense of the ages, we've made fairly rapid pace through Romans but we have paused at Romans 3, verses 21-26, as though we had come to an oasis and we have been thinking together in these marvelous verses about the central truths of the gospel, that justification is by faith alone and comes to us in Christ alone. This evening, we're focusing our attention on Paul's teaching here that justification and salvation and the righteousness of God come to us through grace alone.

“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. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

The Apostle Paul in these early chapters in Romans has brought the whole of humanity before the judgment seat and throne of a holy God and has closed our mouths. He has so expounded God's truth and impacted our hearts in such a way that if we understand and follow his teaching, we make no excuse for ourselves before God's holy judgment. We plead guilty and are conscious that as guilty sinners, we are condemned. And Paul has been emphasizing that this is not only true of those who are Gentiles and have never had, for example, the revelation of the Old Testament Scriptures and the sacrifices that pointed to a way of salvation in God's goodness. This is true of Jew and Gentile alike. There is, verse 10, “none who is righteous, no not one.” Every mouth is stopped and all are condemned by God's law. It is on that platform that he has broken open the good news of the gospel, this gospel that has broken into the world's scene for Paul in recent decades, the glorious good news that God has now fulfilled his purposes of salvation in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Savior.

He emphasizes again, as we have seen, the plight that we have because of our sin. Not just that we have broken God's law, that is surely serious, but that in a sense, far more telling, we have fallen short of the glory of God. Not just that we have gone astray but that our whole lives have been marred and defaced. The image of God in which he has made us for his glory, we have cracked and broken by our sin. We stand in need of the saving righteousness of God in Jesus Christ and he has been urging us to understand that this righteousness comes to us only through faith. This righteousness that comes to us through faith is found exclusively in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, we have justification because in Jesus Christ we have redemption, because Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins. He is the mercy seat whom God has always purposed to set before us as the place, as the one in whom the wrath of God would be exhausted and our sins could be righteously and justly forgiven.

In the middle of this great statement of the gospel, Paul emphasizes in verse 24 that all of this comes to us by grace. He says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift.” And here we come not only to the heart of the gospel, obviously for Paul, here we come to the heart of God stretched out to sinful men and women to bring them justification and it is on this grace that I want us to camp together for a few minutes this evening. Christians have always loved it, the grace of God in the gospel. It is surely of all the great words that Paul uses here, in some sense, is the sweetest word because it is the foundation word. It is because of grace that Christ has come. It is because of grace that he has died as a propitiation for our sins. It is because of grace that the gospel has been preached to us. It is because of grace that faith has borne in our hearts. It is because of grace that Christ and righteousness and eternal life and final glory are ours.

We not only love to speak of it as Christians, we love to sing of it. In a casual moment during this last week, I downloaded a list of I think 48 hymns all of which have the word “grace” in the very first line. An index, I don’t know if there are too many other hymns that have “justification” or “propitiation” in their first line. But of all things, the people of God have always loved to sing about the grace of God in the gospel because it’s not simply something that you can be content to speak about. It’s something that you have got to sing about because grace transfuses itself not only into your mind and into your heart but into your affections and into your emotions and into the whole of your being and it causes you to sing about the matchless grace of your loving Lord.

If you had been following me around my house this afternoon which nobody was, not even my wife. At some point or another you would have said to me, “Will you please stop humming that one line of that one hymn?” And the one line of the one hymn that was going through my mind all afternoon was this line: “Grace that is greater than all my sin.” And really, if there is one thing we were able to grasp by faith tonight in the gospel, if we were able to grasp each of us in our different circumstances and in the secrets of our hearts, that there is grace that is greater than all of our sin, then we surely would have come very near to the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the thing is, for most of us, that while we love to sing of that grace, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,” we do not all always live as though we found that grace amazing. And indeed, the truth of many of our Christian lives may actually be that most days of the week and most weeks of the year, we acknowledge that we are saved by grace, we understand that we need grace but that grace for one reason or another has ceased to be amazing to us. Often, at least in my experience of listening to Christian people, the reason grace ceases to be amazing is because having become amazing to us the day we became Christian believer’s we find ourselves in so many different ways seeking to find our status before God partly in grace and partly in ourselves. As the old writers used to say, we smuggle our own works and our own achievements and yes, even our own levels of sanctification or our fruitfulness in the kingdom of God and in subtle ways we mix, we produce our own fatal elixir by mixing who we are, what we have done, how far we have gone, how we have been fruitful, what other people think about us. And as we drink that elixir, the amazing and the amazement begin to disappear from grace and as many Christians go on in the Christian life alas, we become content to live on a less than amazing grace.

So, our Christian lives become ordinary rather than extraordinary. Our joy becomes tepid. Our enthusiasm for worship becomes meager. Our zeal in witness becomes frigid. Our love for the brothers becomes commonplace. Because what we have begun to do is to adulterate, to water down, to minimize and effectively to temporize the marvelous grace of our loving Lord. We came to Jesus Christ, did we not, as the younger son, empty-handed, dependent entirely on the grace of God? But for many Christians it’s not long before the younger son is transformed into the elder brother and we are beginning to come to God and saying to God, “All these years I’ve been slaving for you and there doesn’t really seem to be rejoicing and joy and a party and singing in my soul any longer.”

That's why it's so important for us to immerse ourselves in the teaching that God gives to us in his word as to how it is that his grace comes to us. Let me say one further thing about it: this is a Presbyterian and a Reformed church and in our Reformed churches we often speak about the doctrines of grace but it can be an altogether different thing to be able to describe the doctrines of grace from experiencing the grace of those doctrines. And I have met many a person who is able to teach those doctrines of grace to those who know them not but in such a manner that you wonder about the grace of the doctrines.

So, how does the Apostle Paul bring to bear upon us this marvelous truth that we live in a gospel of amazing grace? What does it mean to be justified by grace alone? And this is the point he is making, isn't it, in verse 24: we are justified by his grace as a gift. First of all notice, the apostle, in order to help us to understand this, emphasizes that being justified by grace means being justified apart from the law. Verse 21, "the righteousness of God," the righteousness of God that justifies us, that we receive by faith, he says, "has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it." What is he saying? He is saying that by my doing, I can never accomplish my justification. He is saying, the way of law, now what is the way of law? The way of law is commandment given to you and you responding to that commandment and then on that basis, coming to God and saying, "Since I have been obedient to law, I am to be justified in your sight." And the Apostle Paul has proven to us in these three chapters the utter impossibility of thinking, dreaming, that you can be saved after that fashion because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy laws demands." It's amazing, it must be extraordinary throughout the course of history since that hymn was written, the number of people who have lustily sung, "Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy laws demands." But who personally, mentally, spiritually and psychologically have lived as though they could justify themselves by the deeds of their hands.

Paul is anxious to underscore for us, he keeps coming back to this because he realizes this goes very deep down into all of our beings but the greatest enemy of rejoicing and grace is to think that God will be gracious to me because of something that there is in me. Actually later on, you see Paul is laying a foundation for something he's going to say later on that many Christians find difficult to understand and, indeed, find their hearts antagonistic to: the Apostle Paul is going on to say later on in Romans that the only way in which a person can be saved is if God sovereignly elects them for salvation.

Now, why is that when people hear that, they become so agitated? Why is it that some true Christians when they hear that becomes so agitated? Because this little notion that God saves me because of something in me, is so deep dyed in me. And one of the things the gospel of grace is seeking to do is to get down into these deep recesses of my life in which I keep falling back and saying, "You will be gracious to me, God, because of something that's true of me." Until he has washed my mind and my emotions and my affections and my will utterly clean of that false notion and then, at last, I bask in the sheer amazement that it is because of absolutely nothing in me but only because of his infinite grace to me, in Jesus Christ, that I am saved.

I wonder if you remember that passage in the first book of Pilgrim's Progress where Pilgrim's companion tells him about a dreadful experience he had as he was climbing the hill Difficulty. And Faithful describes how as he climbed the hill Difficulty he was diverted and as he was diverted, as he was diverted to a way of life in which he would please God, not so much by trusting in him and seeing God transform his life but he would please God by a kind of mixture of trusting in God's grace but yet, yes a life of morality that would be the reason why God would be gracious to him. He climbs the hill, he encounters a figure and this is how he describes it: he says, "So soon as the man overtook me, he was but a word and a blow for down he knocked me and laid me for dead. And when I had a little come to myself, I cried to him, 'Mercy! Mercy! but he said, 'I know not how to show mercy.'"

And you remember how the Pilgrim explains to him who that man was. He says, "That man was Moses. That man was the bare law, severed from God's grace, indeed, severed from the Old Testament Scriptures." And whenever as a true believer, Faithful stumbled into thinking that God was gracious to him because of anything in him or anything he could accomplish, it would not be long before Moses would come and beat him down and beat him to death until Faithful gloriously experienced another coming to him who had holes in his hands and rescued him from gracelessness.

Now, that's where many Christians are. That's where most Christians are. Perhaps at the end of the day, whatever we may say about we believe in salvation by grace, you almost never encounter a Christian who is struggled in any are of their lives but they have fallen back into this. So here, Paul, may the Holy Ghost help us to hear Paul: not by law, not by the works of our hands but only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ is it possible for any of us to be justified. Justification is by grace apart from law and yet, marvelously as Paul is saying, the law and the prophets, the Old Testament Scriptures bear their witness to the fact that this is the way to be justified. Indeed, the very Decalogue had done that, hadn't it? When God had said, "This is how you are to keep my law. Not in your own unaided efforts but because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. I have redeemed you, therefore, be conformed to me."

So, justification is ours by grace apart from law. Now, that can make us very nervous. Does that mean we live any way we please? Well, it's good that makes you nervous because if we hang on long enough in our studies in Romans, we'll find the Apostle Paul answering that very question. But he wants to get this in place first. Indeed, in some ways, if the preaching we hear doesn't make us ask that question, does this mean we can ignore the law if we're not justified by the law? If we are not asking that question, then maybe we've never really understood grace, that God's grace is so absolutely unmerited, so totally free that none of it is yours because you have kept one single law of God. Indeed, the moment I come to him and say, "Your grace is mine because for one nanosecond of my life I partially kept part of one of your laws," that's the moment I have disgraced grace and that's all it takes for grace to cease to amaze me.

But you notice that Paul not only says that justification is by grace apart from law, he adds and this is very interesting, this is where Mrs. Woods, my school teacher wants to come and tap Paul on the shoulder and say, "Remember your basic grammar lessons, Paul." And Paul wants to say, "Will you kindly get out of my hair, Mrs. Woods." Justification is by grace as a free gift. Now, we understand that grace and free gift are virtual synonyms, that the grace of which Paul is speaking here is that amazing disposition of God to love and then to find a way of pardoning sinners.

Here's something very important for us to understand: God is not gracious to me because Christ died for me. Do you understand that? God does not become gracious to me because Christ died for me, Christ died for me because God is gracious to me. There is all the difference in the world and I'll tell you how that works. It works like this: if I think the reason God has become gracious to me is because Jesus Christ has died for me, then I'm going to be rather inclined to think that what Jesus did on the cross was to persuade a rather unwilling God to become gracious to a dreadful sinner. God does not love me because Christ died for me, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." What am I saying? What I'm saying is this: that God's grace towards us does not begin at the cross of Jesus Christ, it comes to its consummation in the cross of Jesus Christ. It's only because of the gracious love of the Father for Christ's people that he sent Christ into the world.

So, we must realize, this is such an important thing, I think, for some of us in particular to realize: we need to understand that grace towards us goes right through the whole blessed Trinity. It's not just the priority of the Lord Jesus, it's the disposition of a sovereign God in his infinite mercy towards sinners that he is gracious to us and because of that grace he sends his gracious Son to die for us on the cross. It is as gracious as that. It's not something that's tagged onto God. It's not that he wears grace, it is that he is grace. Let me put it another way, follow me: there is actually no such thing as grace. Grace isn't a thing. Grace isn't something that's outside of God that he passes on to Jesus so that Jesus can pass it on to you. It's not something external to God's being. If God is gracious to you, then he's gracious to you in the very center of his being.

As if that weren't enough, the Apostle Paul says to us that God who is gracious to us in this way gives us a free gift. Now, that's what the grammarians call redundancy. In other words, you don't need to say that. If God justifies us by grace, you don't need to say it's a free gift so why does Paul say it's a free gift? Because this is perhaps the most blessed redundancy in all language, that his gracious disposition of mercy that sends his Son, Jesus Christ, to be my Savior, comes in turn to me at absolutely no cost to myself. Absolutely no cost to myself. For most of us here, we were brought up in decent homes where if somebody gave you something, you were obligated to give them something back in return or the social relationships would break down. You remember all these letters when you were a child to Auntie So-and-so who had brought you a gift? Well, there is a return that we make to the Lord but we make that return to the Lord only when we understand that the justification and the salvation which we receive is a free gift to which you and I contribute absolutely nothing.

Do you know what my mother would say? She'd say, "We've got to give them something." Many of your mothers said the same thing, "Make sure you give them something. Tit-for-tat." But there's no tit-for-tat here. There's just a free gift. "Well, let me pay for it." No, you can't pay for it. "Let me do something to earn it. Let me do something that will pay you back for it." "My dear child," he says, "will you not realize that not all the silver and gold in the universe could in any way compensate me for the death of my Son. You cannot afford him." You cannot afford salvation in Christ, it comes to you as an absolutely free gift.

Again, you see, we say, "If it comes to us a free gift, don't say that kind of thing. Tell people that salvation is a free gift, that they don't do anything to qualify for it? That there's nothing they can do to pay back for it and they'll live any way they please." "Ah," says Paul, "You don't understand the gospel. You've never experienced the gospel if you say that. You've never understood the transforming power in your life of receiving a gift through Jesus Christ that is absolutely free to you." Well, why? Because in receiving that free gift we understand it was infinitely costly to him. We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God purposed as a propitiation by his blood. The gift of salvation that is absolutely free to me, I come with empty hands and an empty heart and all I can do is say, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight and I'm not worthy to be called your son," and he gives me his Son. And as the cost of that begins to dawn upon me, the lavishness of his grace becomes almost intolerable to me. It becomes intolerable to my sinful heart. "I've got to do something. I've got to do something." But as the lavishness, the freeness, the bounty of his grace flows down upon me, I eventually find that instinct to do something to earn my salvation is suffocated in the drowning ocean of God's grace and mercy towards me.

I'll tell you something, my dear friends, when that begins to touch our lives, our lives begin to change and there can be very little doubt that one of the reasons we live at such slow dying rates in the Christian world in these days is because we've so minimized the grace of God and the gospel to a kind of evangelical bargain. And it's not washed us away, it's not drowned us in its lavishness. You know, among the founders of our denomination way back in the 1700s in Scotland were two Erskine brothers, actually originally one Erskine brother, the other brother lept onto the ship a few years later on and their father had been a powerful preacher of the gospel under whose ministry the Erskine brothers' friend, Thomas Boston, had been converted. When Thomas Boston saw that the saving grace of God was free, it transformed his understanding of what he meant by the doctrines of grace and transformed his whole life so that in his journal, he notes at one point that people seemed to notice a particular tincture about him. There was a something about him that made them puzzle, that made them say, "What has made Boston different?" It apparently even affected his preaching. They said, "What is it that makes Boston different? What is he pointing to? What has happened to the man?" The answer was very simple: he had discovered that the grace of God and the gospel was not simply a doctrine, it was an ocean in which he was delightfully finding that his works righteousness was drowning and his grace life was sailing like some great liner across the sea, in the delight that knowing that he was bathed in the grace of God he could trust God for absolutely everything.

But then I want you to notice this final thing: Paul says that this justification is by grace apart from law, that this justification is ours as a free gift and this justification by grace is also absolutely consistent with divine righteousness. Look at the way he puts it. This is really marvelous: he says, "God has made propitiation for our sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. We receive Christ by faith and he has done it this way to show his righteousness. He has proven his righteousness in this." Now, how has he proven his righteousness? Because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. What's he talking about? I think he's probably talking about the Old Testament sacrificial system. He's talking about the realization every true believer in the Old Testament, never mind the New Testament, every true believer would have understood that the blood of bulls and goats is not an adequate sacrifice for the sins of a man, so how is it that by means of these sacrifices, God is offering us forgiveness? These sacrifices cannot be bearing God's judgment against human sin. They're not big enough. They're not human enough. They're not real enough.

And all the time, God was looking forward as he passed over those former sins. It wasn't that he was going to refrain from judging them, it was he was looking to the day when he would judge them in the cross of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ would bear the holy wrath of God, not only against the sins of those who were his contemporaries but against the sins of those who had seen through these sacrifices to the promise of God that one day a real Savior, a true Savior, a final Savior, an adequate sacrifice would come and he would be the wrath-bearing substitute for the sins of all of God's people and God in the death of his Son would show that all through the Old Testament Scriptures that pointed to salvation in Jesus Christ, all through them, God was behaving righteously. He wasn't turning a blind eye to their sin, he was saying to them, "For now, look at these animal sacrifices, see that they are not adequate but look at them and see how in your room and stead these animals are dying and look through them and beyond them to a sacrifice that really will be adequate to take away sin, when the wrath of God is poured out upon it on the cross of Calvary."

Jesus Christ becomes the mercy seat, the propitiation for the sins of God's people because not now a man placing his hands upon a dumb beast and confessing his sins over him but the God of all the universe taking his Son and placing upon his Son the sins of us all and pouring out his wrath in judgment even while as John tells us Jesus once said, "And the reason the Father loves me is because I will lay down my life for the sheep." Isn't that grace? That even as his wrath is poured out upon his Son in Calvary and his Son is crying, "My God! Why have you forsaken me when all others have forsaken me? Why have you forsaken me?" The heavenly Father never ceased to love his Son, never loved his Son more than when his Son in all that agony was willing to bear his Father's wrath against your sin and my sin in order that he might demonstrate that he is both righteous in his righteousness and infinitely gracious in his grace.

My dear friend, have you ever tasted grace that is greater than your sin? Grace that is greater than all your sins? What John calls grace upon grace upon grace upon grace upon grace? That's what makes you sing,

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I’m found,
Was blind but now I see.”

But, you see, without that, all I say is, “I’m a Christian believer and I’ve been slaving for you all these years and you’ve never given me a party.” Grace. Grace. Grace. Grace. Grace. Unending grace in Jesus Christ. That’s what I need. That’s what I need tonight in all my sin, all my frailty. I can’t come to God and say, “God, I was minister of First Presbyterian Church. Will you do a deal with me?” All I can do is come to him and say, “O God, even with your help, how often I’ve failed you. I can never work my way into your presence.” And he says, “Child, it’s grace. Grace. Grace. Grace. Grace.”

O, our heavenly Father, how we wish we could grasp the magnitude of your graciousness to us. How we wish we could feel more keenly the power of the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses us from all sin. We thank you for your word. Thank you for the freedom of the gospel. Thank you for good news. O, bathe us in it, we pray. Keep reaching those parts of our thinking and of our feeling that stubbornly resists not just your law and your commandment but resists your grace and your graciousness until embracing Jesus Christ, we really come to believe that you are a loving Father who sent him into the world to be our Savior. In this we pray together for your great name's sake and our blessing. Amen.