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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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Easter Sunday

Romans 3:21-26

Prayer: *Father, I just want to again thank you for again the gift of Easter. I just thank you for what an incredible gift it is. Lord, we just this morning as we come to the place where we open up your book, we pray for the grace and the wisdom that you alone can give. I pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit as we open up your book as we look into what it is that you've given to us on this day, and we pray that it would be of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this is my favorite day of the year, and there's so many reasons why of the 365 other days of the year this is the very best. Physically, first of all, because it marks to me, it marks the real end of winter. And you know, who celebrates the end of summer? Nobody celebrates the end of summer at all. Everybody longs to see it stay but everybody celebrates the end of winter. And even if this day, this Easter Sunday is a little less than stellar weather wise, we know by the time that Easter is rolling around that the whole notion of winter has lost its grips and the

days ahead are going to get warmer and much more pleasant. I mean we've got six to eight months of really good weather to look forward to. And you know, mentally I do believe there's something to be said for SAD, that's Seasonal Affective Disorder, if we had winters that were filled with cold and abundant sunshine, that would be one thing but you know, our winters, they're long and they're cold and they're grey and sunshine is hard to find and that gets depressing. So physically Easter is a day that marks warmer weather to come; mentally it's a day that brings about an idea of more and more sunshine and the mental health that that brings, but both of those pale in comparison to the spiritual richness, beauty and wonder that Easter represents.

Most of us think of Easter as a time of renewal and rebirth, I mean, springtime is the time when green is the most prevalent color and things are springing back to life. But more than anything to me as a believer in Jesus Christ, Easter means victory. Jesus Christ coming out of the grave represents the most significant victory in the most significant war in the history of mankind. And yet the average person probably doesn't give Easter and its spiritual importance a great deal of thought. I mean, our culture even seems to be moving away from a secular recognition of Easter as well. It used to be about Easter parades and Easter bonnets and Easter bunnies and Easter egg hunts, none of which are bad except

when they become the main thing. And what people no longer seem to recognize, though, is Easter as the victory of Christ over Satan.

Well the book of Romans captures that victory and the whole idea of Easter in one single word. It's in a scripture in *Romans 3:21-26*. It's the most important scripture in the entire Bible. And that's not just my word, those are the words of Ray Ortlund who was the father of Dane Ortlund who wrote the quote that we quote each Sunday. Marvelous spiritual leader. Listen to what he wrote about this passage. He says: "What is the most important book in the universe? I'd say the Bible. Which document within the Bible is the most important? Romans. Which chapter in Romans is the most important? Chapter 3. Which paragraph in Romans 3 is the most important? Verses 21-26. Which verse in that paragraph is the most important? Verse 25. Which word in verse 25 is the most important? Propitiation: '... whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.' So the most important word in the most important verse in the most important paragraph in the most important chapter in the most important document within the most important book in the universe is propitiation. That makes 'propitiation' the most important word in the universe. It's worth knowing."

Easter is actually a celebration of that word propitiation, and

this morning we're going to learn about its connection to Easter. And that being said, let me read those verses. This is *Romans 3:21-26*. God says: *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it -- 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, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. 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.*

There's an awful lot of words and there's an awful lot of thought in that paragraph but right there in the middle of the most important paragraph in the universe is that most important word: Propitiation. So I want to define that word this morning, but in order to define it, we have to present the whole of what Paul is talking about here and why this has to do with Easter. You see, according to Paul God put Jesus forward as a propitiation in order to remove five different barriers that stood between God and his people. Because Jesus rose victorious from the grave, we too can participate in the very same power over death that he demonstrated

with no distinctions, no debts, no desserts, no delay and no debate.

See, according to Romans 3, those are the barriers and so let's look at the very first barrier, that's the one of distinction. See, Jesus came into a world that was neatly dividing people into groups. There were groups that were holy and unholy, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile. The scribes the priests and the Pharisees, they were the holy ones; the rest were less. And Easter is a gift from God given to any and all of us who accept it and the gift is something none of us can produce on our own, it is the gift of righteousness. Now the scribes and the priests and the Pharisees, they thought they had earned righteousness by simply following a list of ceremonial rules, but they were nowhere near the righteousness of God. They couldn't imagine God giving righteousness as a gift without regard to race or class, without distinction to anyone who asked for it. Again it says: *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it -- 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.*

God says it doesn't matter if you're a Pharisee or a scribe, if

you're a tax collector or you're a Gentile, there's no distinctions whatsoever, because all have sinned, because all fall short of the glory of God. God is saying every single one of us has failed God's test of righteousness and the reason why all of us has failed is because the requirement of God is perfection itself. You know, we think of righteousness as, you know, it's right living, it's doing the right thing, it's trying as hard as you can to be righteous. But God lays out very clearly what failing to meet that standard is. He says this: It is falling short of the glory of God. We think of perfection as some sort of lofty, unattainable goal. God says it as an absolute requirement, a demand, if you will. If you even but once in your entire life, if you've ever lived a moment short of the glory of God, then you too have failed God's test of righteousness and you're not worthy of heaven.

But God in his mercy here says there's a different type of righteousness that we can claim, and it doesn't have anything to do with keeping various laws. It's a much more powerful form of righteousness that God's prophets spoke about all during the Old Testament. It's a righteousness that comes from trusting in God. See, God really says there's two different ways to become righteous: One is the way that the scribes and the Pharisees attempted, that's by doing what the law demands. Do that and you will become righteous. The problem is no one can do that. God

says if you think you can achieve righteousness by your performance then your performance has to be as God's is, absolutely transcendentally flawless. There's only one person who's ever been able to live a full and flawless life, a life worthy of heaven itself and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone else has fallen short because the standard is impossibly high. Listen to how *James 2:10* puts it. He says: *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.* Well that's not very fair. I mean it would only be fair if God marked us on a sliding scale that was based on our abilities, but God marks us on the same absolute scale that he marks himself on. But if he didn't, if he judged us according to our best efforts, then heaven itself would no longer be a place of perfection but rather a place that's designed to accommodate our failure. It would be no different than planet earth where everybody already knows that -- quote -- "nobody's perfect." That's why God says in his economy there's no distinctions, there's no such thing as righteous and unrighteous because all of us are in the very same boat and it's what God describes in *Romans 3:10*. He says: *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one.* And as God puts it in our verse this morning: *For there is no distinction: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* So God's dilemma is either he changes his scale of perfection, which he can't, or he shuts up all of heaven to all those who failed to make the grade,

which he won't.

So God addresses that dilemma by declaring there's another way to obtain righteousness that's not by doing, it's by believing. Abraham was the very first one to have tasted this form of righteousness simply because he believed God and his promises and that's why God said in *Genesis 15: Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.* So this first barrier of distinction God removed was something that the religious leaders, they despised. I mean they counted on those distinctions between them and all the other, and God through Jesus tells them again and again those distinctions never existed. And what they couldn't stand was that God was offering this gift of righteousness at no cost whatsoever. You see, the second barrier removed was the cost of this righteousness. Easter is a gift that requires no debt. There's no price at all because there's never a price that can be put on something that's of infinite value, and God makes it available to us in only one form and that is as a complete gift and that's why God says in our text this morning: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Well now the third part, the third part of the gift of Easter, the third barrier removed is basically the heart of it, it's the core

of what Easter is all about and that is no desserts. What? I'm not talking about pies or baked goods that you get after supper here, what I'm talking to is referred to as "just desserts." It's what the dictionary defines as -- quote -- "deserved reward or punishment" usually used in the plural, as in "they got their just desserts." The reason why we don't get our just desserts is not because they were never doled out, it's because they were doled out on Jesus instead of on us. And this is where that word, that most important word according to Ray Ortlund, that word propitiation, that's where that word comes into view. Again it says: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*

Now propitiation is an incredibly important concept, perhaps the most important concept but it still is a very hard word to define. The word means literally to take away or to appease wrath. And in the pagan sense propitiation is what you offered to the gods in order to make them no longer angry at you, in order to get them to bless your efforts. The actual word itself though refers to the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. You see, way back in the Old Testament God had the Israelites construct a sacred place where his presence would reside. It was essentially a wooden box. It

was made out of acacia wood, it was about four feet long, two and a half feet wide, two and a half feet high, and the box was overlaid with solid gold and inside it were three very powerful symbols: There was a jar of manna with which God fed the Israelites in the desert, there was the rod that Aaron used as his role as a high priest and there was the tablets that contained the ten commandments, and they all represented God's covenant agreement with the Israelites. And above that box was a lid and it was guarded by two angels. It was the lid that was referred to as "the mercy seat" because once a year the blood of an animal was sprinkled on that lid as the high priest collectively sought forgiveness for Israel's sin. The top of the box was referred to as the mercy seat because the blood of the sacrifice would intercede between God and the tabernacle and the man represented inside the tabernacle. So in between God above and man below is this middle level in which there was blood, the blood of a sacrificed animal. And that animal's blood was there to represent the sacrifice that Jesus Christ would undertake at the cross. Every time an animal's blood was spilled because of sin, every time it was sprinkled on that mercy seat, it represented the fact that between the wrath of God and the sin of man came the blood of a sacrificial animal. And whether it was a ram or a bull or a goat or even a bird, over and over again, God was pointing a picture to the Jewish nation that there was no forgiveness of sin without the

shedding of blood. Hebrews tells us in *Hebrews 9*: *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.* God also made it crystal clear in Hebrews that it wasn't the blood of animals that removed sin. The blood of animals can only cover sin until the actual sacrifice or propitiation of Jesus took place on the cross. The only point and purpose in an animal's sacrifice like that was to paint a picture, it was to demonstrate the one currency we've already spoken about that God was willing to accept from us; and it wasn't works, it wasn't good deeds, it wasn't our own righteousness, it was faith placed in God in his provision for sin. *Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.* Now understand, Abraham had absolutely no idea who Jesus of Nazareth was, I mean, he was born thousands of years before Jesus, but he knew who God was and he knew that God's provision for sin was the sacrificed blood of an animal. And for us in the New Testament it was the shed blood of Jesus Christ who's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Both the New Testament and the Old Testament saints are saved in the very same way. They're both saved by placing their provision in God's provision for sin -- placing their faith in God's provision for sin. The only thing that differs in the Old Testament is that it painted a picture of what it would be; in the New Testament it fulfills it in Jesus. And by placing their faith in God's

provision for sin, observant Jews believed God when he said that the blood of an animal would cover their sins, not suggesting at all that blood is some kind of magical substance, but on the basis of their belief that this was God's provision for sin. And again the whole point of the animal sacrifices was to paint this picture that God was drumming into the lives of the Israelites, that it was blood and blood alone that could appease the just wrath of a holy God.

You know, we have a problem with that word "wrath," I mean we think of wrath and we immediately think of anger, somebody's ticked off, he's full of wrath. That's not the way God relates to it. God thinks of wrath as a right and proper response. I mean the wrath of God is the just response of his holiness to that which is unholy. And the only way we can really understand the wrath of God is to really understand what would happen in the absence of that wrath. You see in the absence of that wrath, the hideousness of what's taking place in Ukraine, the rapes and the murders and the butchering of children, the kidnapping, it would all be met with a shrug of the shoulders. Remove the wrath of God and all moral judgments become simply a matter of opinion. And that's one of the dreadful prices that Darwinists have to pay for a belief in naturalistic evolution. I mean, if you believe that we are nothing but evolved animals, then on what basis can you describe rape and

murder and kidnapping and butchery as evil? I mean nature does that all the time. Grizzly bears in Yellowstone, they're just coming out of hibernation right now and they're starving. You know what grizzly bears love to eat? They love to eat baby elk. I've seen videos of grizzly bears running down an elk and its baby and simply snatching the baby away from its mother as the mother bleats helplessly. I can easily see that kind of behavior as part of the reaction to the curse of the fall that made nature red in tooth and claw, as Tennyson said. I can make sense of this world as a cursed existence where animals live by causing pain to other animals knowing that God entered into this world to redeem it from that curse. But a Darwinist can't make that moral judgment because we're just an accidental collection of chemicals with no ultimate purpose at all. It can't complain about the hideousness of a baby elk being eaten alive by a grizzly bear because he only sees it as nature's way of keeping elk populations healthy and balanced. And if we're just slightly higher on the evolutionary scale than baby elk, then what's the big deal of encountering human slaughter in Ukraine? That's just the way human populations balance and distribute themselves. You see, if you're going to take away God's wrath over sin, you're going to have to take away any moral wrath as well. No just desserts doesn't mean that there's no price to pay for sin, it simply means the price was paid by someone other than me; and that someone was Jesus Christ, the process was called

propitiation and the place where that payment was made by calvary.

Now the fourth barrier removed involved the timing of that event, hence the title "No Delay." Again this is *Romans 3:25*: *This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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.* This passing over former sins, that was a real problem, it started in the garden of Eden. If you remember, God said, *you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, what's going to happen? You're going to die. And Adam and Eve, they ate it and they did not die, they began the process of dying which in their case took hundreds of years. But from Adam's sin onward we see this pattern over and over again with people sinning with no apparent consequence, God appearing to pass over sins. If the wages of sin is death, how can people sin over and over and over again and yet never seem to have to pay that wage? We insist that the payment will be made but just not in this life. And because there's a separation between crime and punishment, there are many who feel there's literally no punishment. And this is not something limited to unbelievers, this is a common complaint among believers, that those who mock God seem to do so with impunity. *Psalm 73* says it well, it says: *This is what the wicked are like -- always free of care, they go on*

amassing wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. I mean the psalmist thinks God himself seems to care so little about dealing with sin. And our text this morning says basically the same thing. It says of God: *In his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.*

John Piper sums up the issue well in one particular case that seems kind of egregious. He's discussing David's sin with Bathsheba. As you recall, David's on a rooftop in the spring and he observes Bathsheba bathing and he's filled with lust, he has her brought to him and he commits adultery with her. And when she later tells him that she's now pregnant, he has her husband Uriah called back from the battlefield hoping he'd spend time with Bathsheba and therefore account for the pregnancy. Unfortunately for Uriah, he refused to take comfort with his wife while the battle is still raging. So David sends him back to the battlefield with instructions that would result in his being killed. And when those instructions are carried out and Uriah is killed, David feels great relief. His sin is now covered, until, until he's confronted by the prophet Nathan and is exposed. This is the way John Piper explains this dialogue:

Nathan says, "Why have you despised the word of the Lord?" (2 Samuel 12:9). David feels the rebuke of Nathan, and in verse 13 he

says, "I have sinned against the Lord." To this, Nathan responds, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." Just like that! Adultery and murder are "passed over." It is almost incredible. Our sense of justice screams out, "No! You can't just let it go like that. He deserves to die or be imprisoned for life!" But Nathan does not say that. He says, "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."

Later on we see David coming to his senses and he lays out his repentance and his confession before God in *Psalm 51*, and there he says: *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.* So here's the problem. We have Nathan who seemed to dismiss the sin altogether and then we have David's confession to God which seems to exclude any responsibility for his sin against Uriah and Bathsheba. I remember the first time I read that, I found it incredibly troublesome that David would make such a confession. I read that, I said, David, are you kidding? I mean, what about Uriah? Are you saying you didn't sin against him? What about Bathsheba? How do you limit your responsibility to God and God alone when what you have done so terribly afflicted the people that you victimized?

Well this is how Piper explains David's mindset. He says: When

Nathan confronts David, he quotes God as saying, "Why have you despised me?" We could imagine David saying, 'What do you mean, I despised you? I didn't despise you. I wasn't even thinking of you. I was just hot after this bathing woman, and then scared to death that people were going to find out. You weren't even in the picture.' And God would have said, 'The Creator of the universe, the designer of marriage, the fountain of life, the one who holds you in being, the one who made you king - that One, I the Lord, was not even in the picture! That's right, David. That's exactly what I mean. You despised me.' All sin is a despising of God, before it is a damage to man. All sin is a preference for the fleeting pleasures of the world over the everlasting joy of God's fellowship. David demeaned God's glory. He belittled God's worth. He dishonored God's name.

So when David said to God: *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge*, he was actually hitting the nail right on the head. See, our problem is we're so rooted in our own flesh and our own sphere that we seldom even think of our sin as having any other dimension rather than a horizontal one. And the idea that our sin stretches vertically up into heaven itself and demeans and diminishes the glory of God is something that seldom invades our consciousness but it's first and foremost in the

mind of God.

Again, this is how Piper puts it, he says: "The problem when God passes over sin is that God seems to agree with those who despise his name and belittle his glory. He seems to be saying it is a matter of indifference that his glory is spurned. He seems to condone the low assessment of his worth. That is what the passing over of sin – forgiving sin, justifying the ungodly communicates: by itself, God's glory and his name and worth are of minor value or no value. And that is the essence of unrighteousness. So God appears to be, and indeed would be unrighteous if he passed over sin without saving us in a way that demonstrates his infinite passion for his glory – which is his righteousness. Apart from divine revelation, the natural mind – the secular mind – does not see or feel the crisis God was dealing with in the cross. What secular person loses any sleep over the apparent unrighteousness of God's kindness to sinners? But according to Romans, this is the most basic problem that God solved by the death of his Son."

You see, approximately 2,022 years ago God took active steps to demonstrate the price he was going to pay to honor his name. 2,022 years ago God put an end to any and all delays on the payment he was going to make for sin. The culmination of the events that started on Palm Sunday and ended with that empty tomb on Easter

morning all had to do with God demonstrating not just to the world as it existed 2,000 years ago in Calvary but also to the whole spirit world and to the entire universe at the same time. God gave the ultimate demonstration of the price he was willing to pay for the ability to be kind to sinners. It was only through the death of Jesus Christ *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.* From the sin of Adam and Eve moving all the way forward to the very last sin committed by the last sheep ever brought into the fold some time in the near or distant future, God chosen one extraordinarily public way to demonstrate the price that he would pay to heal us of our sin. It was the cross. When God says he put forward Jesus as a propitiation by his blood, he means he willingly put himself on display, hanging naked in front of the whole universe, saying this is indeed how hideous sin is and yes, this is the price I'm willing to pay to forgive those sins.

And that leads us to our fifth barrier removed. It's the point of what Easter is all about and that is no debate. Our text says of the cross: *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.* See, without Easter the debate would never end and it's a debate between two great extremes. In the one you have a God who

is just and who exercises that justice completely. But that would mean that every single one of us would be paying the price of our sin and every single one of us would be condemned. It's been said if a justice alone God took every single person who has ever lived on this planet and poured us all out like living dust directly into hell itself, all of heaven would still be saying, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord GOD of hosts.*" You would then have a God of absolute and complete justice but no mercy.

And on the other side of the debate is the God of mercy alone, it's God the justifier and we see lots of that argument creeping up today. I mean God's God, I mean, he makes the rules, he sets what's fair, he can do what he wants without demanding any vengeance or the blood of his own Son. No wrath, no justice, only mercy, so they say. So you have a circumstance in which you have God's justice without mercy on the one hand which is hell for everybody or God's mercy without justice on the other hand which is heaven for all, neither of which resolves God's dilemma. A perfectly just God with a perfectly impossible standard of perfection can in no way welcome into fellowship sinners who have failed to meet his standard. However, a perfectly just God can pay the full price and penalty for all of those sinners himself and thereby meet both the standard of justice and mercy simultaneously.

Penal substitution, that is Jesus Christ substituting himself and bearing our penalty has come under fire lately by those who claim it's cosmic child abuse to say that God can't forgive unless somebody has to pay even if it's God's own son. And the picture that it paints is one of Jesus own victim and that couldn't be more distorted because it was Jesus himself who orchestrated every last detail of his own sacrifice, from the donkey he had waiting to carry him into Jerusalem at the start, to the rich man asking Pilate for his body in the end; and everything in between was not only carefully orchestrated by Christ but it was written down ahead of time so we could see it all play out. On three separate occasions Jesus told the disciples precisely what was going to take place ahead of time, saying after the third time in *John 14: I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe.*

You see, the beauty of Easter is that at the cross the debate between God as the just one and God as the justifier, that debate was settled forever. God became not only the just one who punishes but the justifier who supplies the sacrifice to be punished. Easter celebrates the victory the Father, Son and Holy Spirit won for us through propitiation by satisfying the just wrath of a holy God giving us a righteousness we could never get on our own.

As the scripture says: *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it -- 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."* That's barrier one removed, no distinction. And are justified by his grace as a gift, that's barrier two removed, no debt, no cost. *"Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith,"* that's barrier number three removed, no more wrath, no just desserts, only free grace. *"This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time."* That's barrier four removed, no delay. God's payment on full display in time and space -- quote -- *"so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."* That's barrier five removed, no debate. Not mercy without justice or justice without mercy but both justice and mercy from the just one and the justifier.

And all five of those barriers removed can be summed up in that one word, that one so critical word that Ray Ortlund suggests is the most important word in the entire Bible, and it's that word *"propitiation."* God put forward Jesus as our propitiation as that

which appeases God's wrath. 1 John 4:10: *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* Happy Easter. Let's pray.

Father, I just am amazed at what you have done for us. I just am astounded by the depth of the cross and what was involved and how complex it was and how it reaches forward and backwards all the way from Eden to the end of time. And Lord, we just praise you and thank you for what you've done and what you continue to do in our lives, and I pray for the opportunity to share that and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.