

God's Loving Grace

Romans Series

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Bible Text: Romans 3:21-31; 1 John 2:2

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Our Scripture reading today is Romans chapter three beginning with verse 21.

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.¹

I want you to imagine this scenario. It is a very sad story. You hear some loud, horrible noises from your neighbor's home. It sounds as if something tumultuous is going on. Being concerned for your neighbor and for the well being of that family you go over to the home and you see the most horrible thing you have ever seen in your life. Someone has broken into the house and has viciously murdered every member of the family. They are all lying there in pools of blood. What a horrible thing for you to experience.

Eventually the murderer is caught. He is taken to court. And you are there to testify as to what you had seen. And in the courtroom the judge—now remember, this is simply a scenario that I have created—the judge looks upon this criminal who has murdered five people and he says to him, “I am a very kind person, so I am letting you go today. Just go out and live your life.”

I want to ask you a question. How would you feel about that? Now think about it for a moment.

¹ Romans 3:21-28.

Your immediate reaction—and I can see it on some of your faces—is that is horrible. I mean such a thing should never happen that this person should be thrown in jail and he should be there the rest of his life. He murdered other human beings.

I agree with you.

What I was trying to point out is the dilemma, at least a dilemma from our perspective that God faces. It is a dilemma that God, of course, was able to deal with for he is the one who can do all things and do all things well.

The Word of God tells us that it is against the will of God to justify the wicked, to declare the wicked man to be righteous, to be just.

The way it happened in my scenario in that courtroom where the judge looking at an obviously guilty man to say, “Just go out of here. I am not going to condemn you.”

Well, in Proverbs chapter 17 and verse 15 we read, “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.”²

Now, with that in mind, now just think of this for a moment. If someone justifies the wicked the way that judge did and said, “Ok, you can just go. I mean it doesn’t matter that you have committed multiple murders, just leave.” To do such a thing is an abomination to God.

But listen to the dilemma that we face in terms of what God is doing. We are told in Romans chapter three and verse 23, part of the passage that we have read where it says, “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”³

All human beings have sinned. And then we read in verse 24, just the next verse that some are saved. Now how is that possible? How can God justify the wicked? How can God sit upon his throne, a righteous throne and he as a righteous God look upon guilty men and women and say, “I declare you to be not guilty.” How can God do that any more than man can do that?

Think about that for a moment. We have to understand that if we fully understand the nature of God, we realize that the Word of God teaches us that he is not only a God of love, but he is a God of wrath. Wrath is a concept that is rarely preached about nowadays, unfortunately. But it occupies a very large space in the Scriptures and I just want to belabor it for a little while so that you can get a sense of exactly how important this topic is, the wrath of God.

Well, why do I want to impress this upon you? Because we are talking about God justifying the guilty. And the Word of God tells us that his wrath, his anger is against all who are guilty and therefore against all human beings.

² Proverbs 17:15.

³ Romans 3:23.

What does it say about God's wrath?

I could read hundreds of Scriptures. I am not going to read that many. But let me read several so you get a sense of what the Word of God has to say.

In the book of John. "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."⁴

Romans chapter one. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."⁵

Romans two. "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath."⁶

Romans chapter three. "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)"⁷

Romans chapter five. "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him."⁸

Romans chapter nine. "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known..."⁹

Ephesians chapter five. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."¹⁰

Are we beginning to see the point that this is a biblical teaching?

Colossians chapter three. "For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience."¹¹

And then in the book of Revelation over and over again we read statements like, "He also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God."¹²

"So the angel swung his sickle to the earth and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God."¹³

⁴ John 3:36.

⁵ Romans 1:18.

⁶ Romans 2:5.

⁷ Romans 3:5.

⁸ Romans 5:9

⁹ Romans 9:22.

¹⁰ Ephesians 5:6.

¹¹ Colossians 3:6.

¹² Revelation 14:10.

¹³ Revelation 14:19.

And I could go on and on and on.

The point is that God is a God of love, yes, but he is a God of wrath. And here is the dilemma that is faced. God will punish evil. His wrath is upon those who do evil.

Where is the problem? Well, we all do evil. We all do bad things. So therefore God's wrath is focused not upon some people because they are worse than others, but upon all human beings. How in the world is God, as it is put in our very passage, to be just, to be righteous—because that is his nature—and yet to justify those who believe in Jesus?

The word that we are studying today brings this into focus for us. It is the word “propitiation,” not a very common word in the Bible. It is only used four times. We first read it in the passage that we are studying today where it said, “Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.”¹⁴

We find it again in 1 John chapter two where it says, “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”¹⁵

1 John chapter four, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”¹⁶

And then in Hebrews chapter two, “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”¹⁷

What does that big word mean? I mean that is a big word, a propitiation. It is found in the Bible. What does it mean?

The idea of propitiation is to appease somebody, to block the wrath of somebody, to do something so that that wrath will not fall upon somebody. The idea was commonly used in ancient non biblical religions to talk about something that a human being would do to appease the gods. In other words, you know, if I bring these gifts to the gods, they will not pour their wrath upon me. If I will do this or do that or if I will live this way or live that way, the wrath of God will not fall upon me.

In the Bible, however we are told that propitiation is something that is active work of God himself. Why is that?

Well, there is nothing that I can do to make myself righteous enough so that God will look upon me as a person who does not deserve his wrath, nothing I can do. Every one of us, if we look into our own lives, must say the same thing.

¹⁴ Romans 3:25.

¹⁵ 1 John 2:2.

¹⁶ 1 John 4:10.

¹⁷ Hebrews 2:17.

How could it possibly be that we could do something to merit God's favor so that his wrath would not pour upon us?

The answer is very, very simple. All you have to do... now listen to me. Now just see whether you can manage it. All you have to do is from the moment that you are born to the moment you die, never sin. That is all there is to it. I mean that's simple enough, isn't it?

Now, I want to ask a question. I don't think anyone will raise their hand. How many people have met that standard?

Well, I don't see any hands raised. And, you notice, I am not raising mine.

The point is that we can do nothing to avert the wrath of God and we can do nothing to make ourselves righteous in the sight of God. So the propitiation, the appeasement that God provided came solely from God and not from us. There is nothing that we have done or could do that would make us of such a nature that God's wrath would not fall upon us.

Strictly the work of God where it says in 1 Timothy chapter two, "[He] gave Himself as a ransom for all."¹⁸ He is the one who provided that atonement. He is the one who appeased the wrath of God by taking it upon himself.

The way Peter put it was like this.

You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.¹⁹

You see, this really gives us a sense of the love that God has for us. Think about this for a moment. There was no requirement on the part of God that he do anything to redeem us. If he wanted to, he could have allowed the whole world to be punished eternally for their sins. He could have done that. But because of his incredible love, he chose to do something extraordinary. He chose to have his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, come to earth.

We know. We have read the stories. He came and he was born of a virgin. He lived a perfect, righteous life from the moment of birth to the moment of death. He allowed himself to suffer the horrible pain of the worst form of capital punishment that human beings have ever come up with, the torture of crucifixion. And he did it taking upon himself the sins of his people that they might be freed of the penalty of sin and might enjoy the marvelous and wonderful blessing of being forgiven by God.

But forgiveness was not the end of it. He did—as we have talked about this in past weeks—what we call imputation. He took that perfect life that Jesus Christ lived and he

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 2:6.

¹⁹ 1 Peter 1:18-19.

gave it to us so that when God looks at us, those who know him as Savior and Lord, God does not simply see us as people who have been forgiven, but he sees us as people who are righteous because they have righteousness of Christ. That is incredible.

Imagine, now, the scenario that I started with today, which was a horrible one. But imagine if that judge looked at the man who had committed that act and not only said, “You are free,” but said, “I am declaring for all the world to see that you are righteous”? He couldn’t do that. But Jesus because of his incredible love for us gave to us his own righteousness that we are declared righteous before God.

There is one other concept that I think is important for us. This word translated “propitiation” ἱλαστηριον (hil-as-tay’-ree-on) in Greek, in the Hebrew equivalent in the Old Testament the word is used to speak of the mercy seat.

Now if you remember, the mercy seat was the covering of the ark of the covenant that was in the holy of holies. It was the place where once a year the high priest would go and he would offer a blood sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of his people. And there at the mercy seat God would meet his people and God would give to them the annual joy of knowing that their sins were covered. This was not the final atonement. This was not the final forgiveness of sins. It was awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ. But it was the provision that God had made for the Old Testament saints.

That mercy seat was a special place. We read about it, for instance, in Exodus chapter 25 where we read these words. “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and one and a half cubits wide. You shall make two cherubim...”²⁰ Cherubim, you remember, were a form of angel and they were to be made out of gold, symbols of the cherubim.

You shall make two cherubim of gold, make them of hammered work at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at one end and one cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim of one piece with the mercy seat at its two ends. The cherubim shall have their wings spread upward, covering the mercy seat with their wings and facing one another; the faces of the cherubim are to be turned toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.²¹

And then what was done regarding that mercy seat? In Leviticus chapter 16 it says, “Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its

²⁰ Exodus 25:17-18.

²¹ Exodus 25:18-22.

blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat.”²²

And then in the book of Hebrews, “And above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.”²³

You see, God gave this wonderful, this magnificent picture that he provided. It is a picture of his wonderful salvation. The mercy seat was a place where he would meet with the high priest once a year. And there there would be a visual demonstration of sins being taken away and God’s people being forgiven. It was all looking forward to the time when the Lord Jesus Christ would come and offer himself as the final sacrifice for sin.

Oh, so many people in our world today are trying to be made righteous by the things that they do. The Word of God tells us that is impossible. But Jesus Christ died that men might have and enjoy the blessings of everlasting life.

A beautiful hymn written by Horatius Bonar, one that I love very much, we don’t sing it very often, I think it expresses this whole idea in beautiful terms. And I would like to... I won’t sing it for you. No, but I’ll read it to you today.

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 but that which is divine can bear me safely through.

It is all the work of God. And because it is the work of God we can have absolute assurance that when the time of our death comes we will immediately be ushered into the presence of the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

If you know Christ that is your blessing today.

Just to quote from another hymn. And you know, I almost never quote from hymns, but the great theologian and hymn writer Augustus Toplady wrote a hymn called *A Debtor of Mercy Alone*. And the last stanza talks about the absolute assurance that we as believers have of our eventual presence in the sight of God and our eternal salvation which is ours today.

It says this:

²² Leviticus 16:15.

²³ Hebrews 9:5.

My name from the palm of his hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on his heart it remains,
In marks of indelible grace.

Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given;

And then these last words. Listen to this.

More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven.

What is he saying? He said, “Those who have already reached heaven, they are happier than we are, but they are no more secure than we are because Jesus Christ loved his people with an eternal love. He came to earth to provide an atonement for them and his propitiation, his appeasement of the wrath of God makes it such that we who are his children know, not think, but know, that we have eternal life. And some day we will be in his presence.

Now I don't know about you, but I get excited about that. I mean, I think that is thrilling. I think that that is beyond anything that I could ever imagine. I mean, that is better than any entertainment I could have on earth. That is better than any joy of relationship. It is marvellous. God has loved me forever and given to me the blessings of eternal life so that when I leave this earth I will be with him and be with him forever.

Let me ask you a question. Do you know the Savior?

I want to tell you, my friend, if you don't, you have reason to fear because the wrath of God abides upon all unrighteousness. You have reason to be afraid. I encourage you now. If you have never come to know him whom to know is life eternal, turn to him in faith believing that you might have life forever.

If you are a child of God, well, as we praise him, as we love him, as we honor him, what a joy it would be if we could be the means to reaching others with the precious message of the gospel, that day by day we share this wonderful truth that people around us would hear and believe and that sinners will be converted. What a joy that would be. May it be that each one of us will be witnesses of the grace of God. It is the most important, the most significant and the most valuable message that has ever been proclaimed.

Let's pray together.

I hear those words, my Father,

*My name from the palms of his hands eternity will not erase;
impressed on his heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace.*

*Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is given;
more happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven.*

And, Lord, I thank you, Father, that you give me that assurance. In Jesus Christ I know that my eternity is secure. Oh, Father, I pray that each person hearing my voice today my have that marvelous assurance, may enjoy the knowledge of the fact that their sins have been taken care of by the propitiation provided by the Lord Jesus Christ.

If there is any one here who knows you not, may this one come to know the Savior even today. And for those of us who are your children, give to us, I pray, the blessing of being able to share this message with those around us that multitudes may hear, believe and love you. This I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.