

Romans: The Good News of God

How to Be Right with God (Part 1)

Romans 3:21a

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

In his commentary on Romans, John MacArthur notes that centuries ago Job asked the most important question it is possible to ask: “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2b). That is, “How can anyone be right in the presence of God?”

Job then said of God in Job 9:3-12:

- ³ If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
- ⁴ He is wise in heart and mighty in strength
—who has hardened himself against him, and
succeeded?—
- ⁵ he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
when he overturns them in his anger,
- ⁶ who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
- ⁷ who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
- ⁸ who alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the waves of the sea;
- ⁹ who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
- ¹⁰ who does great things beyond searching out,
and marvelous things beyond number.
- ¹¹ Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
- ¹² Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back?
Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’

Because God is the kind of God he is, Job wondered how a person could ever hope to approach him, much less become right and acceptable before him. How can a sinful human being be right with God who is perfectly holy, infinite, and almighty?

Later on Job's friend, Bildad, echoed Job's question, saying, "How then can man be in the right before God?" (Job 25:4a).

Throughout the Bible, many have asked a similar question.

For example, upon hearing John the Baptist's terrifying warning about God's impending judgment for unrepentant sin, the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?" (Luke 3:10).

The crowd that Jesus had miraculously fed the day before asked him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (John 6:28).

The rich young ruler asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16).

After hearing Peter's gospel message on the Day of Pentecost, some listeners were cut to the heart, and said to him and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

As he lay blinded on the road to Damascus, Saul (who later became the Apostle Paul and wrote this letter to the Romans) cried out to Jesus, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10).

The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

Throughout history men and women have asked the same question as did Job (and the others): "But how can a man be in the right before God?"

The Apostle Paul answers that question in our text for today. Let's read Romans 3:21-25a:

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

Introduction

Lee Eclov, the pastor under whom I served in my first pastorate, tells the story of when he was hanging out at a bagel shop one day. He asked a couple of non-Christian friends, “What’s the most important thing I can pray for you?”

The woman was taken back. “Health, I guess,” she said.

“Health? That’s not the most important thing,” Lee said. “Sooner or later your health is going to go, no matter who prays for you. There must be something more important than that.”

She was stumped. “What’s more important than that?”

“What about a relationship with God?” asked Lee.

“I never thought about that,” she said.

Then her husband said, “You mean God is going to haul us into court or something?”

Now Lee was surprised. “Yeah,” he said, “I guess you could say that.”

What Lee Eclov was saying to them is that one day every one of us is going to stand before God in the courtroom of heaven. And then we will each ask the question that Job asked millennia ago, “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2b).

Every attempt to answer that question throughout all of human history can be summed up in this way, “We can be right with God by our effort, our work, our obedience, or our righteousness.”

The Bible makes it clear that there is indeed a way to God, but it is not based on anything that we do. We can come into a right relationship with God, but not by our effort, our work, our obedience, or our righteousness.

In that regard Christianity is distinct from every other way to God. As far as the way of salvation is concerned, there are only two ways the world has ever known or ever will know. One is the way of divine accomplishment, which is biblical Christianity. And the other is the way of human effort, which includes all other religions by whatever names they may go.

The way of human effort at its core consists of personal

works-righteousness. But how does it work?

Because God has put eternity into man's heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11), all people have a sense that there is life beyond this earthly life. Moreover, according to Paul (in Romans 1:21), all people have a knowledge of God.

So, we have these two facts that are true for all people. First, there is an eternity, a life beyond the grave. And second, there is a God.

Now, God says in the first of his Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). God commands all of his creatures to worship him alone. He will not share his glory.

However, ever since the Fall of Adam every person ever born has turned his or her back on God. We disobey our Creator God, and rebel against him. We do not want him for our God.

Instead we set our affections on our own gods. Rather than loving God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength and with all our mind (Luke 10:27), we love the gods that we create.

God calls these gods "idols." That is why God says in the second of his Ten Commandments, "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Exodus 20:4, *NIV*). These idols, by the way, are anyone or anything other than the true God. It could be Allah, Buddha, nature, earth, ourselves, pleasure, power, possessions, prestige, or whatever.

So, do you see how this works? God has created every of us. Each one of us has a sense that there is a God, and also that there is an eternity. However, because of our sin we have rebelled against the true God. We have created our own gods, or idols, and we set our affections on these idols. And we believe that we can get safely into eternity by our efforts to satisfy whatever our god is. We create our own rules about the personal effort that is required in order to get us into eternity. We live by a standard of righteousness that we believe will get us safely into heaven to be with our god for

all eternity.

The problem with that, however, is that the Bible says that “all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isaiah 64:6).

What the Bible teaches is that the way to God is through the righteousness that he provides. Our righteousness is utterly inadequate and incapable of getting us into a right relationship with God.

One of the major and repeated themes of Paul’s letter to the Romans is righteousness. The passage before us today, Romans 3:21-25a, is one of many in the letter that focus on God’s righteousness, by which all our righteousness is measured.

Ancient Greek and Roman poets loved to write overly dramatic tragedies in which the hero or heroine was rescued from impossible situations by the last-minute intervention of a god. However, the more reputable among them opted not to bring a god onto the stage unless the problem was one that deserved a god to solve it. Only when the problem was insolvable by the human characters on stage did the god appear and solve the problem, which the god alone could solve.

The supreme human problem is our sin, and only the true God can solve it.

Only God can show us the way to himself. And what God does is show us that we need a perfect righteousness in order to stand in his presence. But, we do not have perfect righteousness. We are marred and tainted by sin. Even our best deeds are like a polluted garment.

So, God, in his amazing grace, has provided us with the perfect righteousness of his perfect Son, Jesus Christ. Though we deserve to receive the penalty of eternal death for our disobedience and rebellion, God gives us (or, to use a theological term, *imputes* to us) the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. So, Paul says to the Corinthian church, “For our sake he made him [i.e., Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In the *Iliad* of Homer, the great Trojan warrior Hector was

preparing to fight Achilles and the invading Greeks. As he was about to leave home, Hector wanted to hold his young son Astyanax in his arms and bid him farewell for what ended up being the last time. But Hector's armor so frightened Astyanax that he shrank back to his nurse's arms. His father, laughing out loud, then removed his bronze helmet and picked up his little boy. Astyanax discovered that behind all that armor was his father who loved him.

That is similar to what Paul does in his letter to the Romans, beginning with Romans 3:21. After showing us the wrath of God in the first two and a half chapters, he now shows us the love of God, who reaches out his arms to sinners such as ourselves so that we might know the way to him and be saved.

Lesson

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

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

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

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

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great Welsh preacher, has said that two greatest words in the Bible occur here Romans 3:21: “**But now.**”

The word **but** is an adversative. That is, it indicates a con-

trast, in this instance a wonderful and marvelous contrast—between our total depravity and inability to please God and God’s own provision of a way to himself.

Except for the introduction (1:1-18), this letter has portrayed an utterly dark picture of our sin and hopelessness apart from God. In that introduction Paul gave a brief glimpse of light when he spoke of “the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17).

Now, after backing all sinful people, Jew and Greek alike, into the totally dark and seemingly inescapable corner of God’s wrath in Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul now begins in Romans 3:21 to open the window of divine grace that lets in the glorious light of salvation through the righteousness that God himself has provided.

First of all, Paul says, the righteousness that God imputes to all Christians is **apart from the law**.

The word **law** (*nomos*) is used in the New Testament in a number of senses, much like its English equivalent.

Sometimes it refers to our own (ineffective) efforts to achieve a righteousness that satisfies God.

Sometimes it refers to the commandments and ceremonial rituals prescribed by God in the Old Testament through Moses.

Sometimes it refers simply to divine standards in general.

Sometimes it refers to the entire body of Scripture that God had revealed before the time of Christ, what we now call the Old Testament.

Sometimes it is a synonym for a general principle or rule.

In interpreting the New Testament, therefore, the specific meaning must be determined from the context.

Some commentators understand the word **law** in this passage to refer to God’s divine revelation, either in the narrower sense of the Mosaic Law or the wider sense of the entire Old Testament.

Other commentators suggest that Paul has in mind the sense of works-righteousness, of our attempt to become acceptable by

means of our own human efforts.

It seems that the apostle's main point is the same, regardless of which of those senses he had in mind for the word **law**. He is declaring that the righteousness God gives is entirely **apart from** obedience to *any* law, even God's revealed law. God's righteousness is in no way based on our human effort, or anything that we can do in our own power.

The Jews' own Scriptures did not teach salvation by obedience to God's law, much less by obedience to the many man-made laws and traditions that had been devised by the rabbis and elders during the several hundred years before Christ. Nevertheless, members of the Jewish majority in Jesus' and Paul's day placed their trust in those man-made regulations. In fact, most of them had more faith in rabbinical traditions than in God's divinely revealed law in Scripture.

Before his conversion, Paul was himself the epitome of Jewish works-righteousness. You remember the Apostle Paul said, "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (Philippians 3:4-6). But none of his works-righteousness was able to bring him into a right relationship with God.

The attitude of works-righteousness was carried over into the church by many Jews who had professed to be Christians. They were referred to as Judaizers, because they attempted to add to the gospel the legalistic requirements of the Old Testament, such as circumcision and obedience to the Sabbath laws. Paul admonished the believers in Colossae, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" (Colossians 2:16).

Paul reminded the Christians in Galatia that they were "justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

Later in the same letter he wrote: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Galatians 5:1-2, 6).

And in his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul declared, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Romans 3:28).

God holds before us the standards of his righteousness in order to demonstrate the impossibility of keeping them by our human effort. Because of that inability, the “law brings wrath” (Romans 4:15), God’s judgment on our sin. “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. . . . Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Galatians 3:10-11). “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Countless other New Testament passages (see, e.g., Philippians 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:5) repeat the basic gospel truth that rightness with God can never be achieved by our human effort.

Whether the law of God is the Mosaic Law or the law written on the hearts and consciences of all people, including Gentiles (Romans 2:11-15), obedience to it is never be perfect and therefore can never save. That is a devastating truth to everyone who seeks to please God on his own terms and in his own power—which is why the gospel is so offensive to people.

Conclusion

And so, the righteousness that God divinely imputes is a righteousness that is apart from the law (3:21a).

The story is told of Abraham Lincoln who was walking into town one day when he was overtaken by a man in a wagon going in the same direction.

Lincoln stopped him and asked, “Will you have the goodness to take my overcoat to town for me?”

“With pleasure,” responded the stranger, “but how will you get it again?”

“Oh, very easily,” said Lincoln, “I intend to remain in it!”

Mr. Lincoln’s humor aside, his idea for a ride roughly parallels what happens when we trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. We put on Christ and are clothed in his righteousness. Because we are in him, we are assured of reaching our destination: salvation and eternal life.

But apart from Christ we are left, as it were, standing by the side of the road—and no amount of good works or effort or obedience or anything else can save us.

So, today, do not put any trust in your obedience to the law of God. Put your trust in Christ, and in Christ alone, for he alone is your righteousness and your eternal salvation. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

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

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, several thousand years ago Job asked, “But how can a man be in the right before God?” (Job 9:2).

We attempt to answer that question by referring to our effort, our work, our obedience, or our righteousness.

You have put eternity in our hearts, and each one of us knows that there is a God.

But in our sin and rebellion we have set our affections on idols and we have attempted to achieve eternity by our own self-righteous efforts.

How we thank you for the good news of God. We thank you for the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law. We thank you that you have provided a perfect righteousness in your Son, Jesus Christ.

O Lord our God, clothe us with the righteousness of Christ so that we can be in the right before you on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ rather than the imperfect and inadequate righteousness of ourselves.

And all of this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

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