

# God's Righteousness For The Unrighteous

Righteousness is the great divide in life. Do you have it, or do you lack it? You must have it to get into heaven. Without righteousness you will remain under the wrath of God, alienated from him, at enmity with him, suffering in hell—eternal conscious torment.

By contrast, those with righteousness have great hope. They are loved by God. It's a fierce love. Nothing can separate the righteous from God's love. God has adopted them into his family. They dwell eternally secure. "Joy inexpressible and full of glory, love that surpasses knowledge, and peace that surpasses all understanding" is their eternal experience.

If this is true, acquiring righteousness is the only thing that ultimately matters.

For this reason, righteousness is the subject of the first three chapters of Romans. Paul opens with this thesis statement.

"For I am not ashamed 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).

With these words Paul announces the Good News. But Paul knows the Good News is meaningless to those who already think they are righteous. That is the majority of humanity. So he pivots. From Rom 1:18-3:20 he argues our utter lack of righteousness. His argument culminates in 3:10, "*As it is written, 'None is righteous, no, not one!'*"

In addition, there is nothing you can do to earn righteousness. It is moral perfection, and there is one thing we all agree on, "No one is perfect!"

This is the context to today's text—Romans 3:21-26. It is indeed Good News. Martin Luther considered this text the center of the Bible, the most important passage in scripture.

Note: In Romans 3:21-26 righteousness is used to describe two concepts. First, Paul uses "the righteousness of God," or "God's righteousness" to describe a gift from God to us. But second, it is used to describe a quality in God himself.

The word, "justification" or "justify" is also important. It is a legal term that describes a declaration of righteousness.

Most commentators follow Luther. They consider Rom. 3:21-26 to be the most important paragraph in the Bible.

#### Romans 3:21–26 (ESV)

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

<sup>22b</sup>For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

<sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

<sup>25b</sup>This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> 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 main point is this. For those who will humble themselves, believe the Bad News, and run to the gospel solution, God promises the gift of righteousness. It can't be earned. It can only be received by renouncing my personal righteousness and receiving God's gift of righteousness by faith.

Incredibly, God does this without compromising his own righteousness.

This passage makes four points about how God imputes/gifts righteousness to sinners. 1<sup>st</sup> the Precedent for Righteousness, humble faith; 2<sup>nd</sup> the Need, our Unrighteousness; 3<sup>rd</sup> the Gift, Christ's Righteousness; 4<sup>th</sup> The Vindication, Gods Righteousness/Justice Satisfied.

#### **A. 21-22A PRECEDENT—APART FROM HUMAN EFFORT.**

<sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Verse 21 says God's righteousness is "*manifested apart from the law.*" That means apart from obedience to the law, apart from human effort. It can't be earned.

You can never be good enough to secure your own justification, declaration of righteousness.

Instead, Vs 22 says it is "*The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*" Notice: it's "Faith in Jesus Christ" not faith in yourself.

The mantra “just believe” that is so popular in contemporary culture, won’t do you any good unless your faith is fixed firmly on the *proper object*, Jesus Christ. Why? Because the prophets “bear witness” to it... “The Lord is our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6, 33:16).

### **B. THE NEED—OUR UNRIGHTEOUSNESS**

<sup>22b</sup>For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Vs 23 lays down the problem. In doing so it sums up the argument of Rom 1:18-3:20. “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” Paul describes sin as “falling short of the glory of God?” What does he mean?

God created us in his image and likeness, i.e. for his glory.

Sin has radically corrupted our ability to fulfill this purpose. We do not glorify God. Instead, we besmirch his glory. Our unrighteousness makes God look bad. It also alienates us from him, and God is angry.

Therefore, if anyone will be justified, declared righteous, it will be through a free gift of grace to those who humble themselves and believe the Good News.

### **C. THE GIFT—JUSTIFIED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH**

<sup>24</sup> We are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

How does this happen? Here is the simple answer. Jesus Christ was the only righteous man that ever lived. When you put your faith in Christ, your faith unites you with Christ. God imputes his righteousness to you and your sins are imputed to Christ and punished.

Vs 25 describes the mechanics of how that works. Christ, “*Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*”

Christ is still the object of our faith, but now he is not only our righteousness. He is our sin bearer—our penal substitute.

### **D. THE VINDICATION—RIGHTEOUSNESS SATISFIED & VINDICATED**

<sup>25b</sup>This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup> 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.

In this passage Paul uses “God’s righteousness” in the second way—to refer to a quality in himself.

God has a problem. He has promised justice to sinners, and that is all God owes us—justice. He doesn’t owe us mercy, grace, or love. You only owe something to someone to whom you are obligated. If we were righteous, God would be obligated. Therefore, the only person to whom God is obligated—his Son.

God is righteous. He cannot lie. He cannot go back on his commitments. He cannot ignore either his threats or his promises. He warned Adam, “On the day you eat of it you will die.” Paul picks up this theme in Romans 6:23—“The wages of sin is death.” God’s problem is that righteousness compels him to execute justice. Before God can forgive, sin must be punished with spiritual and physical death.

However, there is a problem. Many sinned throughout the OT, and justice did not immediately follow. Think about Abraham’s sin of unbelief with Hagar, Noah’s drunkenness, Judah’s sex with Tamar, who he thought to be a temple prostitute, and David’s adultery and murder. Under the law adultery and murder were capital crimes. Despite this, the prophet Nathan pronounced this sentence over David. You will not die. Your son is forgiven. Why the absence of punishment? Did God not mean what he said? Has God failed to be exercise justice? No!

Many Christians miss the point. They assume that it would be unrighteous for God to not forgive. They assume that God is obligated to be gracious and merciful. But Paul assumes the exact opposite. God would be unrighteousness if he failed to be just and punish sin. God’s only obligation is to justice. So, how can God forgive sin and still be just/righteous? God must forgive in such a way that righteousness is vindicated.

Vs 25b-26 is Paul’s explanation of how God can be just/righteous and the justifier of the guilty at the same time.

“so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Here is the bottom line. At the cross God justifies us—declares us righteous—while simultaneously showing himself the exquisitely just punisher of all sin and evil—past, present and future.

In other words, God saves us in a way that doesn't depreciate his righteousness. Rather, the cross vindicates God's righteousness. It vindicates his justice, his holiness, his wrath, his hatred of all evil.

Denney: "The very glory of the Atonement was that it manifested the righteousness of God; it demonstrated God's consistency with His own character, which would have been violated alike by indifference to sinners..."

It is the recognition of this divine necessity—not to forgive, but to forgive in a way which shows that God is irreconcilable to evil...which ultimately divides interpreters of Christianity into evangelical and non-evangelical, those who are true to the New Testament and those who cannot digest it." *J. Denney, The Atonement and The Modern Mind, pg 51, & 82*

We've made four points. 1<sup>st</sup> the Precedent. 2<sup>nd</sup> the Need. 3<sup>rd</sup> The Gift, 4<sup>th</sup> The Vindication.

#### ***E. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?***

##### ***1. Humble yourself***

The next verse, 27, contains the most important application. "*Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.*"

Humility is the most important application. If this is how God saves sinners, then there is no place for boasting in personal merit. I'm a Christian because I performed, etc..

This also means the cross cancels looking down on other people because they don't measure up.

##### ***2. Believe the Good News***

Agree with God that you have fallen short of the glory of God—that you are unrighteous. Agree with God that you cannot solve this problem with human strength or effort. Agree with God that you deserve divine wrath. Then run to the Savior who stands with open arms eager to give you God's free gift of righteousness by grace through faith.

##### ***3. Fear God.***

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Prov 9:10, and wisdom equips us to understand the cross.

Where do we get the fear of the Lord? At the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross we fear God and see his wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1:22–24 <sup>23</sup> But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

Edwards: “Never did God so manifest his hatred of sin as in the death of his only-begotten Son. Hereby he showed himself unappeasable to sin, and that it was impossible for him to be at peace with it.”

#### *4. "Keep Yourself in the Love of God" Jude 22*

Today's text describes a divine love that is fierce. God's 'love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD" Song 8:6

God's love is greatly magnified by the fact that it is not compelled by anything in us.

It is free, but at infinite cost to himself.

God is bound to love all that is righteous. You are righteous with Christ's righteousness.

God's desire to lavish the unrighteous with grace is fierce.

This means that God will never leave you nor forsake you. Despite your failings and shortcomings, if you persevere in faith to the end, he will keep his promise to justify you on the Last Day.

All you need to do is cling to Christ by faith and repentance never let go.

In closing, there is a really simple symptom that you either believe or don't believe what this text says about God's gift of righteousness. It's called relating to God on the basis of my performance.

Good Day—

---

<sup>1</sup> Col 2:3 “Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”

Bad Day—

Let's go back to the main point. For those who will humble themselves, believe the Bad News, and run to the gospel solution, God promises the gift of righteousness. It can't be earned. It can only be received by renouncing my personal righteousness and receiving God's gift of free righteousness by faith. Without repentance there is no saving faith.

Incredibly, God gives us this gift while simultaneously Vindicating his own righteousness.