

# **ROMANS**

## Part 7: “The Triumph of the Righteousness of God”

Romans 3:21–30

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Sunday, February 20, 2022 (Sexagesima, or the Second Sunday before Lent)

### **Scripture Reading**

*“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. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (Rom 3:21–30).*

### **Introduction**

We are now in the seventh part of our journey through the New Testament book of Romans. And, *like an archer drawing back the bowstring of his bow*, the Apostle Paul has been building a sense of *tension*.

He has drawn upon deep truth from the Torah, the Psalms, the Proverbs, and the Prophets of the Old Testament to convince us that we have been plunged under the cosmic tyranny of Sin. He has confronted us with the truth of spiritual crisis that we are estranged from God. Paul has unmasked our desperate need (Rom 1:18–25). He has allowed us to know the weight of our sin and the judgment it merits (1:26–32). He has utterly deconstructed man-made religion (2: 1–29).

The Apostle has drawn this tension for a reason. He has shown us the hopeless end of the human righteousness that we might revel in and wonder before *the righteousness of God!*

So, at long last, the tension will be released. The bowstring will be loosed. The arrow of the glorious gospel will fly far and long. And we will behold *“The Triumph of the Righteousness of God.”*

Now, as we delve into today's Scripture reading, I must warn you that this is one of the richest portions of all of Romans. In fact, you could argue that every crucial doctrine and every major theme of this entire letter is both present and concisely distilled into this one text. Several of the ideas we introduce today will take weeks and chapters to fully explore.

But today, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I want to give you three big categories that will help us organize Romans 3:21–30. Those categories are **1.) The Righteousness of God, 2.) The Righteousness through Faith, and 3.) The Righteousness that Ends All Boasting.**

Let's unpack these one by one.

## **Exposition**

### **1. The Righteousness of God**

Look back at the beginning of our text, ***“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”*** (Rom 3:21–22a).

Against the backdrop of the abject failure of human righteousness Paul announces, ***“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested.”*** But *now*—in our desperation, in our crisis, in our hopelessness and powerlessness—the righteousness of God has been revealed and the power of God has prevailed that we might be saved!

That word for ***“righteousness”*** (δικαιοσύνη) is a crucially important word in Romans. In fact, the root word for ***“righteousness”*** (δικη) and the root word for the words ***“just,” “justified,”*** and ***“justifier”*** are all identical. It is root word that is repeated eight times in the course of just ten verses.

God's righteousness is identical to God's justice. His righteousness is his justice and his ***“just-ness.”*** It is his absolute faithfulness to truth and his faithfulness to his promise. His righteousness is his perfection, his goodness, and his holiness. Yet, his righteousness is also his unflinching commitment to hold all evil accountable, to put the world to rights, and to bring an end to the powers of sin and death.

The revelation of God's righteousness is what empowers the gospel for salvation. As Paul declared earlier in this letter, ***“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’”*** (Rom 1:16–17).

The righteousness of God is a foreign righteousness that comes from beyond the realm of creation because it belongs to the transcendent Creator. The righteousness of God stands against and apart from all pretensions of human righteousness.

This righteousness, verse 21 states, has been manifested “*apart from the law*” by which humanity could try to earn right standing before God.

We might ask: *What then of all the ethical laws of the Old Testament? What then of all human effort toward good works? Do these mean nothing?*

Of course not. Paul tells us, The Law and the Prophets all point toward, foreshadow, and reveal our need for the righteousness of God. They point to a salvation that can only be achieved by the righteousness of God himself.

The way God revealed himself in and through Israel’s ancient history anticipates the ultimate and perfect revelation of God that would come in and through Jesus Christ. The whole point of Old Testament was to expose the need for the salvation that only Christ could bring. Every story of ancient history, every tale of the patriarchs, every law, every sacrifice, every instruction for the design of the tabernacle or temple was a signpost pointing beyond itself. Every prophet, priest, and king prefigured the One who would be our perfect Prophet, Priest, and King!

Nevertheless, although God was revealed through Israel, the need for salvation is universally necessary for Jew and gentile alike. As Paul pronounces in one of the most famous sentences in Scripture: “*...For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” (Rom 3:22b–23).

The need for the righteousness of God is a need for *all* people. And the call to salvation is a call to *all* peoples of *all* nations.

Through Jesus Christ, God has made a way to save people from all nations and restore his sin-fractured creation. But, over the course of centuries, he revealed himself in many times and in many ways, through the Jewish people, so that we might have the language and concepts and categories to grasp the salvation that he has wrought for us in Jesus!

But make no mistake. This salvation is not inherited by ancestry. It is not bestowed by bloodlines or human culture. It cannot be achieved through mental intelligence, physical might, or will-power. It is a salvation that cannot be earned for it has already been accomplished by Another.

We cannot comprehend this salvation, but we place our *trust* in it. We cannot grasp it through our performance but we can receive it with the empty hands of *faith*.

That leads us to our second point

## **2. The Righteousness through Faith**

Verse 22 speaks to “*...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*” Romans 3:22a).

Like the root word for “righteousness,” the root word for “faith” or “believe” (πιστευω) is also used eight times in these ten verses.

It crucial to understand faith is not what accomplishes our salvation. Faith is to knowing, believing, and trusting that *Jesus has accomplished our salvation*.

Faith does not achieve our salvation. Faith is the *instrument* through which we receive the benefits of salvation that Christ has achieved on our behalf.

The salvation we receive through faith is multifaceted and multi-valent. It is as complex as it is beautiful. And in this paragraph we are able to witness several dimensions of salvation that was accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let’s look back at the text: “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” (Rom 3:23–25).

There are several things I want to unthread from these verses.

Firstly, *Through faith, we are justified.*

Justification is massive topic in Christian theology. In fact, almost all of chapters 4 and 5 of Romans are going to interrogate and unfold this one idea. But for now, I want you to know that *to be justified means to be credited with the righteousness of another*.

We are not righteous in ourselves. But, through faith, we are credited with—*imputed with*—the righteousness of Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ—One who is God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, the One by whom all things were made—was made a man for our sake. He embraced our humanity. He experienced all of the human experience in all of its “*sea of troubles*.”

In his humanity, Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life we could have never lived in our strength. Yet, in that same human flesh, he also died the death we deserved.

And in this act he enacted what the Protestant Reformer John Calvin once memorably described as the “*wonderful exchange*.” I will quote Calvin at length:

*“This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, [Christ] has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity*

*upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>*

To be clothed in the very righteousness of Christ, when our righteous deeds are but filthy rags, this is the miracle of justification.

Secondly, *Through faith, we are given the gift of grace.*

We are naturally inclined to think of salvation as a reward for good behavior. We naturally think good people go to heaven when they die and bad people go to hell when they die. But such a way of thinking is more like the concept of “karma” in Buddhism than it is the gospel of Christianity.

The gospel is not that we get what we deserve; the gospel is that we get what Jesus deserved! The gospel is not a reward we are given for our efforts but a gift we are given by grace!

*Grace is the gift of God’s unmerited favor and love that saves, transforms, and renews.*

It totally unearned, totally undeserved, yet it is totally sufficient because it is super-abundant, lacking nothing.

Though our guilt is great God’s grace is greater. God’s grace transforms his defiant enemies into his adopted children.

Thirdly, *Through faith, we are redeemed.*

Redemption is a word that is commonly used among Christians, but often misunderstood by Christians. The name of our congregation is “Redeemer.” It is a name that refers to Christ as the one who redeems. What does it mean to “redeem” and be “redeemed”?

Redemption is term of economic exchange. *To redeem means to reclaim to that which now belongs to another means of payment and ransom.*

Thus, in ancient Israel, it was possible to become so entrenched in debt that a person could lose their possessions, property, and their personal freedom. They could be sold into slavery.

However, if a family member was willing to pay that person’s debt, the enslaved person could be restored and set free. In such a case, the one who paid the cost would be known as a Kinsman-Redeemer. The one who had been reclaimed would be known as one who had been *redeemed*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), IV. 17. 2.

When humanity fell into sin, we fell into a cosmic debt we could not pay. We fell under the tyranny of Sin. Sin laid claim to us, and through Sin came the power of death.

But God did not abandon the cosmos to the powers of sin and death. Instead, he sent his Son to reclaim his people and restore his creation. Jesus paid the costliest price in existence—*he paid for our lives by offering his own*. He died on the cross to cancel our debt.

However, by his resurrection, Jesus showed that the power of death that once laid claim to us could not lay claim to him. And for those that have been united to Christ by faith, our redemption means we can be free from the tyranny of sin and the fear of death.

Finally, ***Through faith, Christ is our propitiation and Passover lamb.***

“Propitiation” is a big word. It is a word that not many people know and few people would use in every day conversation. But propitiation is a crucial word in Christian theology, if we want to understand the full glory and wonder of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Propitiation means *that which satisfies the justice of God; it is the appeasement of divine wrath by the means of sacrifice.*

Propitiation speaks to God’s holy hatred of sin and the destruction it brings upon his people and his creation; it testifies to the necessity for God to bring a final end to all evil.

Many of the Old Testament prophets spoke about the great and terrible Day of the Lord—the day of reckoning—when all injustice would be judged, all oppression would be crushed, all evil will be ended.

And this is a longed-for day for all those who have suffered unjustly and been abused by the powerful. It is good news that a day is coming when all will be put to rights.

But is also a fearsome and terrifying day. For if evil must be judged, won’t we who have been complicity with evil have to be judged as well?

This is where propitiation comes in. Through the temple sacrifices in the Old Testament era, God’s righteous wrath toward the sin of his people was satisfied and atoned for. It was *propitiated*, and as verse those former sins were, as verse 25 says, “*passed over.*”

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this was in Exodus 12, on the first ever feast of Passover, when the Lord came to claim the lives of all the first born of all who lived in the land of Egypt.

God had instructed Moses to have the people of Israel sacrifice a lamb for each household and to place the blood of that lamb over the doors and windows of their homes. That way, when the Lord came to claim the life of the firstborn, he would see that a life had already been given in place of the firstborn. He would then *Passover* that house.

This act became the final great act by which God reclaimed his people from the tyranny of Pharaoh. But now, by the sacrifice of his own Son Jesus Christ, God would provide the true and better Passover lamb. He would give his own firstborn a substitute in the place of all who believe. Christ has become the *propitiation* for all who believe.

And unlike the sacrifices of the Old Testament that had to be offered on a daily basis, the blood of Christ was a sacrifice so powerful that it was a sacrifice made once for all of time.

It is this final truth of propitiation that shows the necessity of the cross. By the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross in our place, our sin is not merely forgiven and forgotten. Our sins have been atoned for, cleansed, canceled out. Our debt has been paid. Divine justice has been satisfied.

The Judge himself has taken upon himself the penalty of our sin and given us the gift of his perfect righteousness.

Herein is the brilliance and wonder of the cross! In the cross of Christ, our crisis is ended and the riddle of God's justice is solved.

The cross of Christ is where God's wrath and God's love collide; where steadfast love and faithfulness meet; where righteousness and peace come face-to-face (cf. Ps 85:10).

God has made a way to end sin without ending us. He has made a way to kill the cancer without killing the patient. He has vanquished the tyrant without vanquishing those who have been subjected to his tyranny.

Or as the Apostle has written, *"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"* (Rom 3:26).

### **3. The Righteousness that Ends All Boasting**

Paul concludes today's passage with these words: *"Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith"* (Rom 3:27–30).

The righteousness of God necessitates the end of all human pride.

We are tempted to find our identity, our hope, our grounding in so many ultimately trivial things. For the ancient world, it was often, ancestry, ethnicity, bloodlines, cultural heritage, and outward religious displays. For our modern world, it might be wealth, beauty, intelligence, popularity, individual achievement, and power. In these things we are tempted to find our value, our boasting, our pride.

But that in which we take pride is that which will also divide. For the sake of ancestry, ethnicity, power, and wealth, blood has been shed and wars have been waged. Even at this very moment, in multiple nations on the globe, the sad story of human history rages on, fueled by the pettiness and futility of human pride.

What's worse is that human boasting can even threaten to infiltrate the very people of God. It was even threatening to divide the church of Rome, which is one of the reasons that Paul is writing this letter.

For the Roman church, the source of boasting may have been the ethnic tribes of Jew and gentile. For the American church, it might be the ideological tribes of partisan politics and competing national visions.

But Paul is pleading for us to see that all of the things we want to boast in or take pride in are utterly *trivialized* and dispelled as *illusions* before the righteousness of God. Before the cross of Christ, there can be no room for the boasting of man.

To behold Christ is to know God's holiness, his glory, and his power. To behold his cross is to know grace, his mercy, and the atoning sacrifice. It is to know that God set his affection on you and drawn near to you in your greatest shame, your greatest weakness, and your greatest pain.

If you allow that truth to collide with your heart, it will not provoke pride and boasting. It will bring forth humility and wonder! It will set you free to love as he has loved. It will empower you to live a life that gives glorify a God of such wisdom and grace!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we together marvel at the righteousness of God. May we lay aside all pride and pretensions before the righteousness of God. And, above all, with humble hearts do all there is to do—may we believe and place our *faith* in the righteousness of God that has triumphed over our sin!

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

1. *Read Romans 3:21–30. How does this passage resolve the tension that Paul has set up in Rom 1:18–3:20?*
2. *The small paragraph of Romans 3:21–26 introduces several pivotal theological concepts, including "Faith," "Justification," "Grace," "Redemption," and "Propitiation." We will discuss most of these ideas in greater detail throughout our study of Romans. But for now, how would you define these terms in your own words? These are big ideas, so don't feel bad if you can't get through each concept in one discussion time. If you want to go the extra mile on this discussion question, you may want to consult a systematic theology book or historical catechism.*
3. *According to Romans 1:27–30, why must the truth of Christ's accomplishment end all human boasting? How should the truth of the righteousness of God lead Christians to ever-increasing humility and faith?*