

“Justified by Faith”

Lesson Text: Romans 3:21–30 **Background Scripture:** Romans 3:21–30 **Devotional Reading:** John 3:1–8, 13–17

Romans 3:21–30 (NIV)

²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in^[a] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,^[b] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—
²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, ³⁰ since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To identify some major things that went into God’s plan of Christ’s sacrifice.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that the foundation of salvation is our faith in Christ.
- **Daily Application:** To try and see the things we all have in common, instead of the things we don’t. Paul did! ...and so did Jesus!

INTRODUCTION

Righteousness Declared

Paul’s theme in the second section of his letter to the Romans was *Salvation—Righteousness Declared*. He had proved that all men are sinners (Romans 3:9-20); next he was to explain how sinners can be saved. The theological term for this salvation is *justification by faith*. Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Each part of this definition is important, so we must consider it carefully.

To begin with, justification is an act, not a process. There are no degrees of justification; each believer has the same right standing before God. Also, justification is something God does, not man. No sinner can justify himself before God. Most important, justification does not mean that God *makes* us righteous, but that He *declares* us righteous. Justification is a legal matter. God puts the righteousness of Christ on our record in the place of our own sinfulness. And nobody can change this record.

Do not confuse justification and sanctification. Sanctification is the process whereby God makes the believer more and more like Christ. Sanctification may change from day to day. Justification never changes. When the sinner trusts Christ, God declares him righteous, and that declaration will never be repealed. God looks on us and deals with us as though we had never sinned at all!

But how can the holy God declare sinners righteous? In this section of Romans, Paul answered this question by explaining justification by faith (Rom. 3:21-31), part of our lesson text today.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Paul's letter to the Romans was written in about A.D. 58, most likely from Corinth during his third missionary journey. The nature of the church in Rome was influenced by an edict, issued by Emperor Claudius in about A.D. 49, that had forced Jews living in the city to leave (Acts 18:2). The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that Claudius "banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus," the word Chrestus likely referring to Christ.

This experience probably fostered a certain division within the Roman church between Gentile and Jewish believers, with each group contending that it had a better claim of salvation in Christ than the other (compare Romans 11:13–24).

Paul hoped to visit Rome soon, so his letter served as an introduction of himself and the gospel he would teach in Rome and abroad, God willing. Part of Paul's purpose in writing to the Roman Christians was to inform them of his desire to meet them (Romans 1:11–15) and to gain support for his planned travel to Spain (15:23–28). But the body of the letter is all gospel, making Romans perhaps the closest thing in the Bible to a systematic exploration of Christian doctrine. Our lesson today cuts straight to the heart of the matter: what is required for salvation.

God's Righteousness: Romans 3:21-23

"But now" builds on the thought that came before, that "no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). For some, the law offers a surefire way to become righteous in God's eyes—by perfectly obeying it. But anyone with true understanding of God and the purpose of His laws knows that the law was never intended to make a person righteous and thus justify that person. Laws can't make a person righteous... it would take "the righteousness of God."

So, what is the righteousness of God? The righteousness of God is neither an attribute of God nor the changed character of the believer. As defined in Romans 1:17, the righteousness of God is Christ Himself, who met every demand of the law for us in our stead, and "who has become for us ...righteousness" (1 Corinthians 1:30). God's righteousness is demonstrated and communicated to us through the cross.

Paul expanded on the idea of the law in Galatians 3:19–29, which refers to the law as "our schoolmaster," teaching what God is like and keeping us safe until Jesus came to reveal the righteousness of God (see Romans 3:22a, below). Likewise, the writer of Hebrews said that the law was a shadow of the good things to come (Hebrews 10:1).

1. How did Paul define the purpose of the Law according to the "righteousness of God" (Romans 3:21)?

What Do You Think?

What texts in the law can explain that God's righteousness cannot be attained through obedience to it? (See Isaiah 53:6).

Digging Deeper

How do the words of the Old Testament prophets build on this idea?

Here's how: Every time a man took his sacrifice to the Temple for a sin offering, confessed his sin, and killed the animal, he was testifying that he had faith in a righteousness that was not his own. Thus, the law bears witness to an external righteousness that God provides, but the law itself cannot provide. Likewise, the prophets witness to this righteousness (c.f. Isa. 53:6; the same thought that is expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:21 and in 1 Peter 2:21–25).

The phrase *there is no difference* (v. 22b) looks back to Paul's arguments about the fallenness of both Gentiles and Jews. Because both groups (which encompass all of humanity) are lost in sin and living counter to God's will, salvation for both must

be attained in the same way. What is that way? That way is “through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 22a). The righteousness of God then does not come to one who simply has faith in God but to those who by faith claim the name of Jesus Christ. Saving faith in Christ is a necessary part of the righteousness God provides (Acts 4:12). “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23 of today’s lesson). This brief but all-encompassing statement is further enhanced by the fact that both Jew and Gentile have come short of God’s glory.

So, what is God’s glory? God’s glory is to give God the worship that is due Him and extolling others to do the same, implicitly or explicitly (examples: Joshua 7:19; 1 Chronicles 16:28–29). In these examples, there is a sense of God’s revealing Himself through His glory so that people might experience Him and honor Him. The glory of God can be defined as His presence with His people (compare John 1:14). God’s glory is a true and holy representation of God’s character, in contrast to any idol or other falsehood (see Romans 1:23–25). As His image-bearers, we were meant to reflect well on our Creator by living lives that reflect His holy character, His glory (Genesis 1:26; Leviticus 20:26; Isaiah 43:7; 1 Peter 1:13–25). Sin prevents us from accurately modeling God’s glory. Thus the standard of God’s holiness is none other but the person of Jesus Christ.

2. What did Paul mean by “there is no difference” (Romans 3:22-23)?

God’s Grace and Christ’s Sacrifice: Romans 3:24-26

God has two kinds of attributes: absolute (what He is in Himself), and relative (how He relates to the world and men). One of His absolute attributes is love: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). When God relates that love to you and me, it becomes grace and mercy. God in His mercy does not give us what we do deserve, and God in grace gives us what we do not deserve. The Greek word translated “freely” is translated in John 15:25 as “without a cause.” We are justified without a cause! There is no cause in us that would merit the salvation of God, but we enjoy it! It is all of His grace!

However, grace came at great cost to God (Romans 3:24b-25). Salvation is free, but it is not cheap. Three words express the price God paid for our salvation: *atonement*, *redemption*, and *blood*. “Atonement” means the satisfying of God’s holy Law, the meeting of its just demands, so that God can freely forgive those who come to Christ. The word “blood” tells us what the price was. Jesus had to die on the cross in order to satisfy the Law and justify lost sinners. Redemption for Paul’s Jewish audience would call up an image of payment to free a prisoner sentenced to death (Exodus 21:29–30).

Forbearance points to God’s patience (2 Peter 3:9). Taking into account the cycle of sacrifices necessary before Jesus’ death, God’s forbearance was seen in His allowance for animal sacrifice to forgive sins, even though these only looked forward to Jesus’ sacrifice (Hebrews 10:4). The past sacrifices were a shadow of the true sacrifice to come. God did not overlook sins, but He withheld judgment of those sins until Jesus’ death—the sacrifice that took away sins once and for all (9:26; 10:10). This understanding of God’s patience works well with the image Paul painted in Acts 17:30–31 of God’s holding all people to account because there was no more excuse for ignorance regarding what He required.

3. What did Paul mean by “all are justified freely by his grace” (Romans 3:24-25)?

What Do You Think?

How have you experienced God’s patience?

Digging Deeper

How can we balance God’s patience toward sinners with the urgency of accepting Jesus’ sacrifice when witnessing to a nonbeliever?

God made His statement about sin at the cross. He not only said something about it, He did something about it. *At the present time* refers to the time since Christ's sacrifice. A remarkable tension is created, then, when God, in His perfect character, desires both justice and mercy for sinners. He could not accurately be called just if He simply turned a blind eye to wrongdoing. Through Jesus' sacrifice, a path forward is created. Those *who have faith in Jesus* experience God's mercy and are justified when they are covered in Christ's blood and made new.

4. What did God do “at the present time” (Romans 3:26)?

Human Boasting: Romans 3:27-30

Verse 27 here would have resonated with Jewish Christians who heard it. They took great pride in God's having chosen them and revealed His desires through the Law of Moses. Some even boasted about their own success in following that law faithfully. If a person could earn his or her salvation, that person would have reason to boast because they measured up to the *law that requires works* (compare Romans 4:4–8). If anyone could boast about his adherence to the law, it was Paul (Galatians 1:14).

Since salvation is not accomplished by anything a sinful person can achieve, no person has the right to boast (Ephesians 2:8–9). For this reason, even Paul counted all things “garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:8–9). *The law that requires faith* supersedes the prior laws and accomplishes what a law of works could not: salvation in Christ.

Verse 28 of today's lesson represents a summary of Paul's argument to this point. Keeping the law does not accomplish righteousness; trying to keep *the law* makes us aware of our shortcomings. Justification only comes *by faith*. The works that result are evidence of faith (Galatians 5:22–25); they are integral to a living faith (James 2:17), but they are not saving actions.

5. How should we as Christians see our salvation? (Romans 3:27-28)

What Do You Think?

What evidence can you point to that you are being made new in Christ?

Digging Deeper

In what areas are you still trusting that the Spirit is recreating you in Jesus' image?

Paul frequently uses rhetorical questions to further his argument (examples: Romans 6:1; 8:31). Because of his Jewish readers, Paul wanted to say more to arouse the Jewish mind which still cannot conceive of the heathen being loved and justified by faith alone. So, Paul answers his own questions: “is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too.”

One God (v. 30 of today's lesson) calls to mind the Shema: “The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The command that follows is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5; compare Mark 12:29–30). The Shema was recited multiple times a day by observant Jews in pursuit of teaching the command and keeping it in their hearts (Deuteronomy 6:6–9). If there were many (real) gods, maybe there were different ways to justify the Jews and the Gentiles. But since there is only one God, He chose only one way to *justify* all people in the same way: *by faith*.

The circumcised refers to the Jews, as this was the physical sign of the covenant between God and Israel (Genesis 17) and often a badge of pride for Jews. *The uncircumcised* refers to any Gentiles. Paul was a Jew, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, but called

to be an apostle to the Gentile. His message has made both one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The law of faith is the universal law of salvation by God. There is only one way to the Father, no matter one's background: Jesus Christ himself (John 14:6).

6. Why did Paul ask these two questions in verse 29? (Romans 3:29-30)

What Do You Think?

Do you affirm in thought, word, and deed that God is the God of all?

Digging Deeper

If not, what repentance and repair might be called for?

CONCLUSION

Things We All Have in Common

All human brokenness and sorrow can be traced back to sin. That's something that everyone has in common. Rumors of wars create us-versus-them mentalities and the potential of violence through stoked hatred; war makes that violence a state-sanctioned reality and sows fear and destruction, reducing people to statistics of the dead and displaced. Even in times of relative peace, the seemingly conflicting hopes and fears for a nation's future can become polarizing calls to action, preventing the respect and cooperation necessary for cooperation and thriving within communities.

Even when we are not facing existential threats of war or violence, we are all broken by sin. It's sad that we are all united in this, but fortunately, the cure is also something we all have in common. Our own efforts cannot heal us. We can make every effort to get self-help materials, and even seek professional advice. Nevertheless, those sins we try to conquer through constant effort will always drag us back down, always requiring us to try again—unless we call on Jesus, who removes the sin, and gives our efforts a whole new meaning.

We all need Jesus. He is the one person we can all have in common and in whom we can find unity outside of our sinfulness (John 17:20–23). He is the only one who can transform our efforts from futility in sin and death to Spirit-led works of hope and life.

What Do You Think?

What futile efforts toward earning salvation can you commit to abandoning?

Digging Deeper

How will unity with other believers in Christ help you in this endeavor?

PRAYER

Gracious Father, thank You for Your gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. Thank You that it is a gift offered to everyone regardless of race or status. Forgive us when we think we have to earn this gift. In Jesus' name through whom we have our salvation. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Stop struggling to earn the gift of salvation that Christ offers.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Counted as Righteous" where we summarize Paul's view of Abraham's faith. Study Romans 4:13–25.