

Justified by Faith

Devotional Reading: John 3:1–8, 13–17

Background Scripture: Romans 3:21–30

Romans 3:21–30

21 But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets;

22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

26 To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

29 Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also:

30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

Key Text

Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. —Romans 3:22–24

Examining Our Faith

Unit III: Standing in the Faith

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify what is “excluded” and why.

2. Explain the concept of *propitiation*.
3. Brainstorm ways to explain the concept of *propitiation* to an unbeliever.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Always Going Downhill
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I. God's Righteousness (Romans 3:21–24)

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- C. Universally Required (vv. 22b–23)

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II. Christ's Sacrifice (Romans 3:25–26)

- A. For Righteousness (v. 25)
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- B. God of All (vv. 29–30)

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- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Claudius *Claw-dee-us*.

propitiation *pro-pih-she-ay-shun*.

Sisyphean *Si-suh-fee-uhn*.

Suetonius *Soo-toe-nee-us*.

Thanatos *Tha-nuh-toes*.

Introduction

A. Always Going Downhill

The Greek poet Homer (lived in the ninth or eighth century BC) recorded a myth about a king named Sisyphus. The human king figured out a way to cheat his death: by capturing the god of death, Thanatos, and thereby preventing anyone from being able to die. The consequences of this imprisonment were grisly, and the other gods could not allow the situation to persist.

Thanatos did not stay inactive forever. And when Sisyphus did die, he received an interesting punishment. He was to roll a heavy stone up a hill. But, just as he was about to reach the top of the hill, the stone would roll back down again. And this punishment would go on forever. This is the origin of characterizing an unachievable task as Sisyphean.

Surely we have all experienced a Sisyphean task, like having the carrot of a raise or promotion dangled just ahead, always out of reach, or family harmony always seeming just beyond the next therapy session or fight. Trying to earn salvation is another Sisyphean task we all know, whether we have struggled with it ourselves or only seen others in the midst of this impossible quest. There must be another way! And Paul teaches that other way in our lesson text today.

B. Lesson Context

Paul's letter to the Romans was written in about AD 58, most likely from Corinth during his third missionary journey. He had not planted the Roman church, and the letter's origins are something of a mystery. It could be that believers who were present at the first Pentecost brought it back from their Jerusalem pilgrimage to their home in Rome (Acts 2:10). The nature of the church in Rome was influenced by an edict, issued by Emperor Claudius in about AD 49, that had forced Jews living in the city to leave (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). The expulsion of Jews from Rome resulted in Gentile Christians being in the majority in the church there, if they had not been the majority already (1:5–6, 13). Their majority status seems to have continued even after the death of Claudius in AD 54 allowed Jews to return to the imperial city (compare Acts 18:2 with Romans 16:3–5). Much of Paul's letter was therefore directed specifically to the Gentile believers there (11:13).

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.

I. God's Righteousness (Romans 3:21–24)

A. Attested by Law and Prophets (v. 21)

21. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.

But now builds on the thought that came before, that "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of 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. If lawful action cannot justify a person, what can?

For the first time in this letter, Paul separates law from righteousness and affirms that his argument is not new; it aligns with *the law and the prophets*. This was a way to refer to all of the Old Testament (examples: Matthew 22:40; Luke 16:29; Acts 13:15). The law was intended to make people aware of their sin, and the prophets explicitly called out the people when they became blind to their sinfulness. Paul expanded on that idea 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).

What Do You Think?

What texts in the law can explain that God’s righteousness cannot be attained through obedience to it?

Digging Deeper

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

B. Obtained in Christ (v. 22a)

22a. Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.

The righteousness of God mentioned in verse 21 is here revealed to be the gift believers receive. There is some challenge in understanding the phrase *faith of Jesus Christ*. The Greek could imply that the faith is Jesus’ own, as in His faithfulness to His promises. However, the context suggests that Paul is referring to one’s faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is not just a collection of beliefs but is connected to the person of Jesus Christ.

Beginning in Romans 3:9, Paul makes clear that no person is righteous. The issue at hand is not Jesus’ faithfulness, but how *all them that believe* can be called righteous (Romans 5:19). By faith in Jesus, we are eligible to and do, in fact, receive the gift of being called righteous (compare Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3–8; Ephesians 3:12). The contrast is with the attempt to be made righteous through works, including keeping the law (compare Galatians 2:16). And we do well to remember that righteousness described here is being made right with God, despite our continued imperfect efforts.

C. Universally Required (vv. 22b–23)

22b–23. For there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Paul likely begins an aside here (see commentary on Romans 3:24, below). The phrase *for there is no difference* 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 (compare 3:9; Galatians 3:28).

The expression *all have sinned* is also found in Romans 5:12 (compare 1:18–21). In the Old Testament, *the glory of God* can be used in two primary ways: to refer to an experience of God (examples: Exodus 16:10; Ezekiel 1:28) or 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.

Report Cards

Growing up, I never liked school. Starting in kindergarten, I would invent all kinds of excuses to stay home. For instance, I'd run home from my bus stop and tell my mother I needed a hug that inevitably lasted *just* long enough to miss my ride. My mom passed away recently, and I ran into some of my old report cards as we cleaned up her belongings. My struggles and failures were preserved and filed among mom's other essential papers. But something I found in the filing cabinet changed my initial embarrassment. Mom had kept her report cards from elementary school to high school. These papers revealed that my mother struggled in school as I did!

Failure can make us feel isolated. But if we were to compare our "report cards" of righteousness, we would see we are all in the same dismal position. How does knowing that we have all sinned and not attained God's glory change your attitude when you speak of Jesus to your friends and neighbors?

—J. M.

D. Freely Given (v. 24)

24. Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Some have misunderstood this verse as teaching universal salvation. The argument usually ties *being justified* to "all [who] have sinned" in Romans 3:23. However, this reading cannot be preferred, as Jesus himself warned His listeners regarding eternal punishment (Matthew 7:13; 25:31–46; etc.). In keeping with other scriptural teachings—Paul's included—it is far more likely that much of Romans 3:22–23 (above) is a parenthetical thought. This links being justified not to verse 23 but to "all them that believe" in verse 22a (above; compare 1:17).

When one is justified, God considers that person righteous. There is a stark difference between works-based salvation and justification *by his grace*. In a works-based salvation, one strives as hard as one can and hopes at the very end that he or she has done enough to earn God's pardon. This suggests that salvation can be earned, like a wage, and can only be withheld if the work was not up to snuff. In contrast, justification by God's grace is given *freely ... through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 4:4–5; 6:23; Galatians 3:13).

Redemption for Paul's audience would call up an image of a slave being purchased out of bondage into freedom (compare Hebrews 9:15). To the Jewish recipients of this letter, redemption also meant payment to free a prisoner sentenced to death (Exodus 21:29–30). The metaphor of being slaves, either to sin or to righteousness, occurs later in this very letter (Romans 6). Elsewhere, Paul compares redemption to adoption, the act through which we become God's sons and daughters (Galatians 4:4–5).

II. Christ's Sacrifice (Romans 3:25–26)

A. For Righteousness (v. 25)

25. Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.

Propitiation can be defined as the sacrifice that God requires to forgive His people. This was a major part of the process of atonement. In Israel, sacrifices were offered throughout the year and for various purposes. The mercy seat of the ark of the covenant was the center of the sacrificial system. But only the head priest could go into the holy of holies and only on the Day of Atonement, once every year, to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. This sacrifice was a mercy from God so that He would forgive their sins (Leviticus 16:2, 13–15).

The sacrificial system was a temporary solution, made obsolete by Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross (Hebrews 9:11–14). When we respond *through faith*, Jesus' *blood* accomplishes the atonement we require for *the remission of sins* (John 1:29; Hebrews 10:19–22; Revelation 7:13–17; etc.).

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.

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?

B. For Justification (v. 26)

26. To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.

At this time refers to the time since Christ's sacrifice (comparable to "in this world" as a contrast to "that which is to come" in Ephesians 1:21). God's *righteousness* and justice go hand in hand (Job 37:23; Psalm 11:7; Isaiah 5:16; etc.). 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 *believeth in Jesus* experience God's mercy and are justified when they are covered in Christ's blood and made new.

III. Human Boasting (Romans 3:27–30)

A. "It Is Excluded" (vv. 27–28)

27. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

This verse 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 of works* (compare Romans 4:4–8). If anyone could boast about his adherence to the law, it was Paul (Galatians 1:14).

Visual for Lessons 10 & 11. *Discuss why God's righteousness needs to be known before we can be called righteous through faith.*

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 “dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:8–9). *The law of faith* supersedes the prior laws and accomplishes what a law of works could not: salvation in Christ.

Bragging Rights

When is it acceptable to boast? Hiring experts assert that the resume is an appropriate place to talk oneself up and make a big deal out of one's accomplishments. Indeed, what would a potential employer think if candidates did not bring up college degrees, prior work experience and accolades, and other pertinent information that qualified them for the job and made them the best candidates for the position? But, of course, too much zeal in touting one's accomplishments can backfire. For instance, in my hometown, the health director was forced to step down because of his resume: he allegedly oversold his college education.

Paul never weighed in on the merits of an effective resume. But on boasting in general, he reminds us that we have nothing to boast about when we stand before God. No matter what good works we could put on a resume documenting our lives, we fall short of what God requires. Bearing that in mind, how will you guard against illicit boasting?

—J. M.

28. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

This verse 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.

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?

B. God of All (vv. 29–30)

29. Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.

Paul frequently uses rhetorical questions to further his argument (examples: Romans 6:1; 8:31). On the most basic level, *God* created everything (Genesis 1:1), and so He is the rightful *God of the Gentiles also*. Paul's Jewish audience would have agreed with this. But *the Jews* sometimes assumed that, because *God* had chosen them specially, He was opposed to all other people and chose the Jews *only*. Assuming that God's special care for Israel was an exclusionary concern for Israel ignores God's love for all people (Isaiah 42:5–7), expressed both in law (examples: Leviticus 19:10, 33–34; Numbers 15:15–16; Deuteronomy 10:18–19) and in His provision (examples: Genesis 16; 2 Kings 5; Jonah 3). Jesus made clear God's care for all in both His words and deeds (examples: Matthew 5:38–43; Mark 7:24–30; John 3:16–18).

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?

30. Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.

One God calls to mind the Shema: "The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:4). The command that follows is to "love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (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: *through faith*.

The circumcision 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 uncircumcision* refers to any Gentiles. This made the practice a relatively clear-cut (pun intended) way to distinguish between the two groups. But there is only one way to the Father, no matter one's background: Jesus Christ himself (John 14:6).

Conclusion

A. 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. Like Sisyphus, we can make every effort to roll our stones to the top of a hill. 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 stone 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?

B. Prayer

Gracious Lord, 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.

C. Thought to Remember

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