

## Good News for the Guilty

### Romans 3:21-26

I shared this story number of years back. I'm sure some of you will remember it. When I was around 4 or 5, my mom had left a camera out and apparently she saw me eyeing it and so she told me not to mess with it. I'm not sure why she thought a 4-year-old boy would be inclined to mess with a camera, but that's what she thought and so she warned me. Well, guess what I did? I messed with the camera. I'm not sure exactly what I did, but somehow I "accidentally" snapped a picture. Obviously, this is pre-digital days, right, and so I couldn't just delete the photo. Later that day mom noticed that the brand new roll of film that she had put into the camera had a picture taken on it. It was on "2" not on "1" anymore. Guess whom she suspected? Me! Right. So, she asked me if I had played with the camera. I assured her that I had not. Eventually, some weeks or maybe even months later that film was sent off to be delivered. And then the fateful day came when the pictures came back. Guess what Mom saw on the first picture? Guilty! I was guilty. I could not deny it.



Over the last several weeks as we have looked at Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul has been showing us a picture as well. It is a picture of everyone of us and the picture says, "Guilty!" We are all guilty before a holy God.

In the case of that picture of me the fact that I was guilty just meant that over the years as that story got recounted it provided plenty of laughs . . . at my expense. It's funny. But when it comes to our guilty before God it is a very serious matter. We stand condemned. We are under His wrath. We are all accountable to Him (3:20). We are guilty and we need good news.

As Paul comes to 3:21 that's exactly what he begins to proclaim – good news for the guilty. At this point in Romans, Paul begins to explain the good news of what Jesus has done for guilty sinners. Today we are looking at 3:21-26. It is a dense passage full of theological truths that flesh out the good news. Paul will continue to work out many of the themes in these verses in the rest of Romans.

The first bit of good news that Paul talks about here is that . . .

### I. The guilty become righteous through faith (3:21-23)

Look at verse 21. He says:

<sup>21</sup> *But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,*

*But now*, marks this transition where Paul begins to articulate the gospel. He begins to

explain the good news for those who find themselves in the guilty condition that he described in 1:18-3:20.

The main assertion in this verse and really in the whole passage that we are looking at today is that *the righteousness of God has been manifested*. This is talking about the appearing of Jesus Christ in human history and specifically about his death and resurrection, which made righteousness possible. This is where the righteousness of God was manifested. Paul says the righteousness of God was manifested *apart from the Law*. The righteousness of God was never found in or through the law, but when rightly understood the *Law and the Prophets* pointed to it God's righteousness.

Paul makes it very clear that righteousness is obtained by faith. Verse 22:

*<sup>22</sup> even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; . . .*

The righteousness of God that we need is experienced *through faith in Jesus Christ*. It does not come through accomplishing the works of the Law; it comes through faith in Jesus. He is the object of our faith. Faith is the means by which we reach out and receive Christ and becomes righteousness.

Now, Paul adds what seems to be a repetitive statement when he says that it is *through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe*. The reason he adds this second phrase is to emphasize the word "all." He wants to make it explicitly clear that faith in Christ is the pathway to righteousness for ALL. There's not one way for the Jews and another for Gentiles. There's not a path through the law and another by faith. Righteousness is only through faith in Jesus.

He says *there is no distinction* in this. Why?

*. . . for there is no distinction; <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

This is what he has made explicitly clear so far in Romans. Jew and Gentile alike stand guilty before God because everyone has sinned. There is none righteous; not even one (3:10) and as such all are under God's wrath (1:18). We can't work our way out of this predicament. There is nothing we can do. He said it so clearly back in 3:20 when he said, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight." It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that the guilty can become righteous.

Now, as Paul goes on, he adds the thought that . . .

## **II. The guilty become righteous as a gift (3:24a)**

He says, in verse 24:

<sup>24</sup> *being justified as a gift by His grace . . .*

Justification is one of the central themes that Paul will continue to flesh out in the rest of Romans. It is a legal term. It means that one is acquitted. One is judged as not guilty and so therefore free from all condemnation. But acquittal is only part of what it means to be *justified*. On the positive side it means, “to be declared righteous.” God declares that one has a standing of righteousness before Him. And so it means to be free of the demerits of sin and possessing the merits of righteousness. God declares that this is what is true about the one who has faith in Jesus.

If there was ever something a guilty person needs, it is justification. We need to be able to stand before a holy God and have Him relate to us as if we are not guilty. We need to be able to stand before a holy God and have him relate to us as if we have the merits of perfect righteousness. Do you have that? Do I have that? None of us do. The picture has captured reality. We are all guilty.

And so how does the guilty become righteous? Can you work really hard for it? Can you try to earn it? Do you get on a self-improvement program and try to convince God that you are better than you used to be or you are at least better than a whole bunch of other people? No! You can't work for it. You can't earn it. Listen again to what Paul says. We are justified *as a gift by His grace*.

Justification is something that is freely given. It is a gift. It is an action that flows from God's grace. He gives us something that we don't deserve – righteousness; a right standing before Him. For the one who has faith in Jesus, God simply declares that we are righteous as an act of His grace. This free gift of righteousness is good news for the guilty.

But here's the deal. This right standing before God is free to us, but the basis by which God is able to do this was very costly to Him. There was nothing free about it to Him. Here's why . . .

### **III. The guilty become righteous by means of the work of Christ (3:24b-26)**

And the work the Christ accomplished was costly. Paul in verse 24 to explain the basis by which God is able to declare that we are righteous. He says:

*being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;*

He says that we are justified *through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*. God didn't (God couldn't) just willy-nilly declare that we are justified. There had to be a righteous means by which He could declare that we are righteous. That means was by the *redemption which is in Christ Jesus*.

*Redemption* involves the idea of being liberated by means of a payment. It was a word

that referred to ransoming a captive or a prisoner of war out of slavery. In our case, we were slaves of sin; we were in bondage to the devil. But on the cross, Christ secured our redemption. The price that he paid as a ransom to secure our redemption was his own life. Mark 10:45, says:

*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*

Our justification was free to us, but it was costly to Jesus. He offered the payment of His own life as a ransom that we might be redeemed from our slavery to sin and our bondage to Satan.

Now, as we come to verse 25, Paul gets more specific about how this redemption worked. He makes it clear what this act of ransom entailed. He says about Jesus:

<sup>25</sup> *whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.*

The NIV says “a sacrifice of atonement.” That translation is helpful in the sense that it helps us understand that Paul is now using the language of sacrifice. And of course, that is pretty clear with the mention of Jesus’ blood. Jesus’ death is to be understood as a sacrifice. But the older translation found in the NASB of *propitiation*, tells us something that “sacrifice of atonement” doesn’t. If all we have is a sacrifice of atonement, we have information that a payment was made for sin. And certainly that is true of the sacrifice of Jesus. But more is involved. *Propitiation* means that God’s wrath is satisfied; it is turned away.

One of the themes of the first three chapters of Romans is that man is sinful and as such is under God’s wrath. Remember Romans 1:18? It said:

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,*

And in 2:5 it said:

*But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,*

The picture is clear. We are guilty and as such we are facing God’s just wrath. Jesus’ sacrifice propitiated God’s wrath. It is satisfied God’s wrath. It is turned away . . . FOREVER. All of God’s righteous demands for sin are met. And so for the believer, God will never again deal with you on the basis of wrath. This is good news for the guilty.

All of this then reveals God’s righteousness. Paul goes on to say:

*This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; <sup>26</sup> for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

Some might have look at God's history with Israel and wonder if He really was righteous. How could Israel be so sinful and not have God totally reject them? Did God just disregard Israel's sin? Does this in some way demonstrate that God is not righteous?

Paul says, "no." God didn't disregard Israel's sin. Rather, this was an expression of His *forbearance*. He *passed over the sins previously committed* under the old covenant. He allowed those sins to go unpunished for a time. He, in fact, gave Israel a way to deal with their sin through the Old Testament sacrificial system. But it was never adequate and it was never the final solution. The adequate and final solution to man's sin was Christ. Through Christ God *demonstrated . . . His righteousness at the present time*. And so God is both *just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*. This is good news for the guilty.

The guilty become righteous through faith. The guilty become righteous as a gift. The guilty become righteous by means of the work of Christ on the cross.

How are you hearing this good news this morning? I'm sure that there are many ways, but I want to focus in on a couple of groups of people. First, some of you are in a position where you have never trusted Jesus. Maybe you've been trying really hard to be a good person. Maybe you've been trying to get it together and clean up your act. But as you've heard the message of the first part of Romans, you see yourself in the picture that Paul has painted. Guilty. You know it. In your heart of hearts you know that you stand guilty before a holy God. You can no longer deny that the wrath of God rests upon you and will for eternity unless your relationship with God changes.

Here's the good news for you. The guilty become righteous through faith. The guilty become righteous as a gift. The guilty become righteous by means of the work of Christ on the cross. You can't earn it. You can't work for it. The work that Christ did on the cross is simply a free gift that you received by faith. The moment you turn to God in sincere faith and trust that what Jesus did on the cross, he did for you, God will forgive your sin and He declare that you are righteous before Him. That is good news for the guilty. In a moment, through an act of genuine faith, your stand before God can be changed from guilty . . . to justified. In a couple of minutes when I close in prayer, I'm want to give you an opportunity to express such faith to God.

But before I do that, there is another group to whom I want to say a few words. Others of you have trusted Jesus, but you feel guilty before God. Once again you've committed that sin that you vowed for the thousandth time that you wouldn't do again. And this morning you feel guilty. Here's the good news for you. The guilty become righteous through faith. The guilty become righteous as a gift. The guilty become righteous by means of the work of Christ on the cross.

When you expressed faith in Christ's work on the cross for you, God declared that the righteousness of Christ is yours. God declared, "Not guilty." That was your standing with God the moment you trusted Jesus and that is still your standing with Him even as you struggle with sin. Your current struggle with sin does not change what God has declared to be true about you. Your struggle with sin will never change what God has declared to be true about you.

Jesus has redeemed you. He paid a great price for you. What he did on the cross has turned away God's wrath from you forever. You are not guilty. God is not mad at you. Let these truths sink down deep into your soul. Live in these truths. Relate to God on the basis of what He has done for you in Christ. Someone has once said that we need to preach the Gospel to ourselves every day. That is so true.

Now, having said this, I do want to add that God doesn't want you to stay stuck in your sin. He is committed to helping you grow through a process of sanctification. Out of love He will discipline you and sometimes that is uncomfortable. But it is always motivated by love on God's part. He's not angry with you. He's just at work restoring the glory of which we all fall short. You are not guilty.

As I close this morning, I'm going to say a prayer that some of you are ready to pray this morning. I want to offer a simple prayer that expresses faith in Jesus and what he did on the cross. If you are ready to receive the gift of salvation that is offered on the basis of what Jesus did, you can just pray this prayer silently in your heart to God.

God, I acknowledge that I have sinned against you in my thoughts and in my deeds. I haven't done what I should do. And I have done things that I should not do. Before You, a holy God, I am guilty. God, I am sorry for my sin. I acknowledge that I need Jesus. This morning I choose to place my faith in Jesus and what he did on the cross for me. I believe that he paid the penalty for my sin. And so today I open up the door of my life and I receive Jesus and I give my life to you. Father, thank you that because of Jesus you forgive my sin and you declare that I am righteous. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer in genuine faith, God has done exactly what we've talked about this morning. He has forgiven you and he declares that you are not guilty. He declares that he sees you with all the righteousness of Christ. You may feel something; you may not. That doesn't matter. What matters is faith. God always responds to genuine faith. Let me encourage you to tell someone if you made that decision today. Tell a friend or come up and tell me.

For all of us I'd like to pray again. Father, we thank you for the work of Jesus on the cross for us. We thank you that though we continue to struggle with sin, on the basis of the redemption that is found through Christ, you have declared that we are justified. We thank you that nothing can change our standing of righteousness before you. Help us to believe these truths. Help us to live in light of them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.