

Righteousness That Comes By Grace Through Faith

Romans 3:21-24

June 18, 2017

Introduction:

One of the essential educational roles I've discovered that I have as a parent is to help my children differentiate between a "want" and a "need." For example, one of my daughters will mention how desperately hungry she is and how she really needs for me to drive her to Chick-Fil-A for supper. I like Chick-Fil-A and all, but I'm not so sure we *need* to go there every night of the week. Or perhaps a new movie will be coming out they've been looking forward to seeing I will be informed I need to take her to see it on opening night. Yes, my dear, you may *want* to see that movie, but we don't *need* to see it. Seeing a movie is not a *need*; it's a *want*... unless it's a new Star Wars movie, in which case I absolutely do *need* to see it opening night!

In life, we really don't have many real needs other than food, water, clothing, and shelter. Most of our needs can be boiled down to those few items. But those are physical needs; what about our spiritual needs? What is the greatest need we have in regards not to our bodies but to our souls? In light of what we have been studying in Romans over the past few months, I think we can confidently assert that our number one need is *righteousness*. Righteousness is the one thing we need in order to be justified in God's sight but it's the very thing we lack. All throughout Romans 1, 2, and 3, Paul has been making his case that God's wrath stands against us because of our unrighteousness. Instead of giving honor and thanks to God, we worshipped the creation instead of the Creator. Rather than obey God's law, we've violated it over and over again in our willful disobedience. Thus Paul ended his sweeping indictment of humankind in Romans 3:19 saying that as a result of our sin, "every mouth will be stopped and the world held accountable to God."

But today we come out of the dark tunnel of our unrighteousness into the glorious shining light of the gospel. The passage we'll be looking at over the next two weeks is the heart of the book of Romans. Martin Luther said these verses were, "the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible." ¹ It's here we find the gospel summed up in a tightly packed series of verses which Paul will expand upon throughout the rest of the letter. Paul has laid out the problem for us in chapters 1-3; now he begins to give us the solution: the righteousness we so desperately need has been given to us by grace through faith in Christ.

So let's consider what Paul has to say about the righteousness that has been revealed in the gospel by opening your Bibles to Romans 3, which can be found on pg. 941. We're going to consider just the first half of this immensely significant paragraph, looking at v. 21-24 this morning and then finishing it up next week with v. 25-26. So please follow along as I read Romans 3:21-24. **"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..."**

There's no truth more important for your life than what we just read in those four verses. I can say without exaggeration that this passage acts as a summary of the entire point of all of Scripture. So if you want to memorize anything from the book of Romans, start with these verses right here because this is Christianity in its most condensed form. And the single most important word in these verses is a word repeated throughout and that's the word *righteousness*. It's used twice as the subject in v. 21 and 22 and as a verb in v. 24 where he says we're "**justified by his grace,**" which comes from the same root, meaning "to make righteous." So as we study this passage, we're going to carefully consider what this righteousness is that's so essential to our spiritual well-being. I have five observations we need to make about righteousness from these verses and the first of them is this...

1. It is a righteousness that comes apart from the law

Paul begins v. 21 with these two words, "**But now...**" They are small words with a huge significance. Paul has made his case that we're all under the wrath of God for our unrighteousness. In the verse before this he said no one would be justified in God's sight by our works. He quoted Scripture after Scripture saying that no one is righteous, no one seeks God, no one does good. Had Paul ended his letter at v. 20, we would have nothing but sheer terror of God's righteous wrath awaiting us. And yet against the black velvet backdrop of our hopeless despair shines forth these words of brilliant hope, "**But now...**"

What is this bright ray of hope shining into the darkness of our sinful estate? He says, "**But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...**" In other words, there's another way. The righteousness we need to be acceptable in God's sight can be gained by another means. We believed we could earn it through our obedience to the law. Provided we followed all the rules, kept all the commandments, did everything God asked of us, we thought we could merit his favor. But none of us have kept God's law. We've all failed. We can't muster up the righteousness we need and so pursuing righteousness by our works is a dead end. So the good news of the gospel tells us there is another way, that there's a righteousness to be had that comes apart from the law, that has nothing to do with whether we've obeyed the law or not.

This strikes at the heart of every other religion in the world. Every religion is ultimately about earning your way to heaven. It may be packaged differently, but at the core of all religions is "do this" or "practice that" or "achieve this" and if you do then you will gain salvation or nirvana or heaven. It's all law based in that it's all performance-oriented. And even we who call ourselves Christians can fall into this trap. Ask yourself this: "If you were to die today and God asked you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?" If your response has anything at all to do with how nice you were or how generous you were or how you tried to be a good person and never did anything really bad like rob a bank or murder someone, then you're relying on your own righteousness that Paul says will not save you. You need a righteousness that comes apart from the law, apart from your own resume that you hope will impress God with what a great fellow you've been. The righteousness you need cannot and will not come from your own efforts.

But note though how Paul says that though this righteousness comes apart from the law, it is nevertheless spoken of in the law. Look at v. 21 again, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...”** Paul isn’t about to tell us something that contradicts Scripture. It isn’t that justification came by obedience to the law in the OT and now God has suddenly changed the rules. The reality is the righteousness we need was never to be gained by the law but was always to come by faith.

Let’s consider a few examples Paul uses. Turn ahead a chapter to Romans 4:3. Going back to Abraham, Paul says, “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” Then he turns to David just a few verses later in v. 7 and quotes what David wrote in Psalm 32:1 saying, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are not covered.” And these before this, back in Romans 1:17, Paul quoted from Habakkuk 2:4 where it says that “The righteous will live by faith.” So Abraham, David, and the prophets all bear witness to that fact that righteous was not to be gained by our obedience but rather by faith. These OT saints didn’t know precisely how God would do that, but they understood and testified to the fact that righteousness would come apart from works of the law.

So then, that leads us to wonder: from whence does this righteousness come? If we have not earned for ourselves the righteousness God requires, who has? Where does it come from? That brings us to our second observation about righteousness...

2. It is a righteousness purchased for us by Christ

After saying that righteousness is not found in the law, Paul now tells us where the righteousness we need comes from in v. 22. He says there it is, **“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”** He says much the same thing at the end of v. 24 saying our justification comes **“through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”** Jesus is the one who provides the righteousness we need.

In v. 22 we’re told Jesus has done it and in v. 24 we’re given a word that tells us how. Notice the word **“redemption”** there in v. 24. What does redemption mean? One commentator puts it like this, redemption is “liberation through payment of a price.”² It would be a word familiar to those in the ancient world in term of redeeming those who were slaves or prisoners of war by paying of ransom to secure their release. So to redeem someone was to pay a price to free them.

So how does Christ do that? Well, we’re debt to God on account of our sins. First, we owe God a life lived in obedience to him, a life which none of us lived. As Paul has made abundantly clear over the past three chapters, we’ve all failed to give God the glory, honor, and thanks he deserves. So Christ does for us what we failed to do: he lived the perfect, sinless life we should have lived. Instead of disobeying the law, he perfectly fulfilled it. Instead of giving into temptation, he resisted the devil. So Christ offers his perfect life in our stead, so that we might go free. His sinless life is reckoned by God to be our life and so our debt is paid.

Then second, due to our sin, God needs to punish us. His just wrath must be satisfied against sin. But once again, Christ stands in our stead. On the cross, he suffers the wrath of God for us. He experiences the death we should have received by being forsaken by the Father. Instead of us being rejected by God, God rejected Christ as Jesus became sin for us and experienced the furious outpouring of the wrath of God in our place. Paul states this clearly in 2 Corinthians 5:21. Skip ahead a few books in your Bible and go to 2 Corinthians 5:21 and see how he describes how Christ grants us the “righteousness of God” by taking our sin upon himself. Paul writes, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That’s exactly the same idea Paul is expressing here in Romans 3

As a result, Christ redeems us by living the kind of life we should have lived and dying the kind of death we should have died. God regards Christ’s obedience as if we had done it and so Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness. Luther and the other Reformers often referred to this as a “alien righteousness” in that it is a righteousness not our own. It comes from outside of us, not earned by us by our works but by the obedience of Christ. There is nothing within you that merits your justification; it is not by works of the law you have done but solely because of the righteousness of Christ.

My friends, there is nothing more central to all of Christianity than this. Salvation comes not by your own works but by the righteousness of Christ. If you’re looking to your own goodness and moral uprightness as your ticket to heaven then you will be damned. The righteousness required of you cannot come from you: it comes only from Christ because only he fulfilled the law on your behalf and suffered God’s wrath in your place. If you must know anything in all the world, then you must know this central truth of the gospel, because your eternal soul rests upon whether you’re relying upon your righteousness or the righteousness of Christ.

Paul then goes on to remind us for our failure to muster up righteousness on our own in v. 23 and so our third observation about this righteousness we need see is that...

3. It is a righteousness needed because all have sinned

No doubt v. 23 is familiar to many of us because it’s used often in gospel presentations to provided Scriptural support to our need for a savior. But since it’s so often quoted out of context, let me start by reading at v. 21. **“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...”** We’ll stop there.

The word **“for”** is used twice and that connects it to what comes before it, so we need to think through how these phrases connect. So Paul tells us that the righteousness God requires of us comes through faith in Christ for all who believe. Why? Because **“there is no distinction.”** What does he mean by that? Paul spent all of chapter 2 demonstrating that the Jews were just as guilty of sin and were the Gentiles. While the Jews thought they were the exception because they possessed the law, Paul’s point in

chapter 2 is that as far as God's wrath was concerned, there was no distinction to be made between the Jews and the Gentiles because both groups were guilty of breaking the law. So we could elaborate on v. 22 like this: righteousness comes through faith in Christ for Jew and Gentiles equally because there is no distinction between them.

So now with that in mind, we can read v. 23 in context. **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** means righteousness must come through faith in Christ because both Jews and Gentiles have sinned. This is another case where the word **"all"** doesn't mean all without exception but rather all without distinction. Paul's saying of the two categories of people - Jews and Gentile - all have sinned. Mind you, every individual without exception has sinned, but that's not the point Paul is making here. He's continuing his argument from chapter two in stating that the Jews need the same righteousness as the Gentiles because they've sinned and provoked God's wrath just the same as the Gentiles have.

But before we move on, let's consider that last phrase Paul uses in v. 23. What does Paul mean by **"fall short of the glory of God"**? He already said, **"all have sinned,"** so is this just a different way of saying the same thing? I don't think so. I think the distinction lies between the failure to meet a goal and the means by which that failure came about. The goal was righteousness - that's the glory of God which we fell short of; the means by which we fell short was sin - we disobeyed God's law.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Let's say a group of swimmers are given the task of swimming across the English Channel and if they do so they'll win a prize of \$10,000. But one swimmer never shows up for the race because he wanted to sleep in instead. A second swimmer shows up but finds the water too cold for his liking and returns home. A third swimmer gets a half mile into his swim, sees shark fins, gets scared and returns to shore. A fourth swimmer gets half way but decides this whole race thing isn't worth his trouble and decides to stop and wait to be rescued. All of them fall short of the goal of the glory of having successfully swum across the English Channel. None of them have earned the prize. But the reason they failed to do so - laziness, discomfort, fear, self-centeredness - is what causes them to fall short: it's their sin, as it were. Thus we've all fallen short of the glory of God in that we've failed to reflect his glory by being righteous - that's the goal - and the way we've done it is due to our sin.

So then, Paul has laid out our complete and utter failure to achieve the righteousness God requires of us due to our sin. We cannot earn it in any way. The Gentiles who had God's law written on their hearts disobeyed and the Jews who had it written in the Law of Moses failed to obey. The only thing we've earned for ourselves is God's wrath. So in light of that, this next point must be the case if we're to have any hopes of being declared righteous, so our fourth point about God's righteousness is this...

4. It is a righteousness given by grace as a gift

Having said that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Paul gives us this wonderful news in v. 24 saying we are **"...justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."** The word "justified" comes from the same

root word as righteousness, thus we could also translate this as we are “declared righteous by his grace.” This verse is stunning in what it’s saying so we had best pause to think reflect on it. We are sinners who have fallen short of God’s glory to whom God owes only wrath and judgment and yet he justifies sinners through Christ. He doesn’t owe anyone this. Recall all that has been said about our sinfulness since Romans 1 and then be floored by this truth that he has justified us by his grace. If we are indeed the wicked, unrighteous, rebellious sinners Paul says we are, then what else can the gift of God’s righteousness given to us through Christ be but grace!

And this grace is given as a “**gift**” or if you are reading in the NIV, it was given “freely.” No one is under an obligation to give a gift. You can choose to give me a present for my birthday or not. I can’t demand it of you. A gift by its nature is not a wage; it is not owed to the individual as an obligation. So then, considering how unworthy we are as sinners under the wrath of God, what else could it be called for God to declare a sinner to be righteous except for a freely given gift of grace of the highest magnitude?

Listen: until you recognize the depth of your sin, you’ll never be amazed at the glory of the gift of God’s grace. Reflect on the lyrics of most famous song about grace we have:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

John Newton, the author of that hymn, was a trans-Atlantic slave trader. He knew the ugliness of his sin. He was painfully aware that he was a wretched and vile man for his involvement in the slave trade. He knew he deserved the wrath of God. And so how wonderfully amazing it was for him to be given grace instead of wrath, righteousness instead of judgment, eternal life instead of eternal death.

My friends, you will never be amazed at grace unless you see your sin for what it is and recognize what it deserves. It is not without reason we have a time of confession in our service. You can’t appreciate the grace of God in Christ until we are honest about our sins before him. Romans 2 comes before Romans 3 and so we spend a short amount of time in private confession before we come to respond in praise in order that our praise might be fueled by an awestruck amazement that God would have saved a wretch like me. We have too few opportunities to reflect on our sin, opportunities made less so by looking at our stupid phones all the time, such that it should be a precious and sacred moment when we actually stop looking at Facebook and stop bellyaching for a moment about the liberals and gays and whoever else we blame our society’s ill upon and for a silent minute or so take a cold, hard look at the plank of sin sticking out of our own eye. We do confession as part of our service so that we can be far more joyfully amazed at the free gift of God’s grace than we would have without it. So please don’t waste the confession time of our service: use it to better see the depth of your sin so you can better praise God for the heights of his grace.

Well, there's one more essential observation we need to make about this righteousness and this concerns how we are to receive it. We've seen that it comes to us apart from the law, that it was earned for us by Christ, that we couldn't have gained it by our own efforts because we've all sinned and that therefore it must come as a gift by grace. But the final point we need to consider this morning is our fifth point, which is...

5. It is a righteousness received by faith

Please look back in your Bibles once more at v. 22. Paul says, "**The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.**" Faith and believe: both come from the same Greek root and are used interchangeably throughout Scripture. To have faith in Christ is to believe in him, and to believe in Christ is to place your faith in him. God's righteousness, while given freely by grace as a gift in that Christ died for sinners who had no right to expect him to do so, nevertheless must be received by faith. We need to believe the good news of the gospel that promises us that Christ paid the debt we owed for our sins and that his righteousness is counted to us as if it were our own. If we don't have faith, if we refuse to believe the gospel, then what Christ did is of no benefit to us.

Now while we need to have faith in order to be saved, it must be faith in Christ and not some general vague faith in God. The importance is the object of our faith, not the presence of faith itself. For example, I may have a strong believe that my parachute is going to work to safely allow me to jump out of the airplane and land in one piece on the ground. But if my parachute has a huge tear in it, it doesn't matter how confident I am in trusting my parachute; the object of my faith is worthless to save me from falling to my death, regardless of the strength of my faith.

Conversely, I may board a plane to Florida with great fear and trepidation because I barely have enough faith to believe this 100-ton jet plane can fly, and once on the flight I can bite my nails and be a nervous wreck, but since my faith was placed in a worthy vessel and competent pilot to fly me 1000 miles and land me in Orlando in one piece, my faith, however weak, was rewarded because of what I put it in.

So to receive this righteousness we need, purchased for us by Christ, we need to "board the plane" as it were. We need to believe that Christ can get us to our heavenly home and so we need to place our faith in him to do what we cannot do for ourselves. Just as I cannot fly and so need to trust the airplane and its pilot to do it for me, so also we cannot muster up the righteousness God requires of us, so I need to trust that Christ has done it for me on the cross. The righteousness of God comes only by faith in Christ, but is it is available to anyone who has faith in Christ.

Conclusion

So let me close by encouraging you to let your soul drink deep of the truth being taught here. We have a need that we could not fulfill. We need righteousness and all of us, without exception, have failed to establish that righteousness by ourselves. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God and so if there is to be any hope for us, it must

come not from within but from without. We need a righteousness that's not from ourselves but from Christ. He is our perfection righteousness. He redeemed us from our sin and lived a life of perfect obedience to God. And he offers that to all who would stop trying to earn their way to heaven and instead simply believe in the promise of the gospel that whoever would believe in him, would not perish, but have eternal life.

This is the glory of the gospel: in Christ, we have a righteousness that comes by grace through faith to deliver us from the wrath of God and justify us in his sight. Thanks be to God that we have been given that glorious gift through Christ Jesus our Lord. Let's pray.

Endnotes

1. Moo, Douglas. NICNT; The Epistle to the Romans. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1996.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.