**Romans**

**Lesson 6: Salvation—Righteousness Declared Romans 3:21-31**

Paul has proven that all men are sinners. This is the verdict at the conclusion of chapters 1-3. No one is righteous, not one single person. Furthermore, the whole world has been silenced and is, therefore, accountable to God. Everyone is guilty as charged and awaiting condemnation. God gave the world the law through the nation of Israel, and this law has condemned the world. How? By showing that no one can live up to its righteous requirements. The standard is simply too high. Paul writes, *“Therefore no one will be declared righteous by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin”* (3:20). No matter how moral or religious a person may appear outwardly, the Bible clarifies that all are sinners who fall short of God’s righteous standard. The purpose of the law was to make this truth evident to mankind. The law reveals man’s sinfulness in hopes that men will turn to God and be saved. Galatians 3:24 states, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

The situation is rather bleak as Paul nears the end of his condemning prosecution. The whole world stands guilty and defenseless. There appears to be no remedy. Every man’s life and character have been held up to the law and found wanting. Moreover, if God had not acted, everyone would have been left in this condition—guilty and simply waiting for the final judgment (Hebrews 9:27; 10:31). Left in this state, the world would be hopeless.

But, for the word “But!” What a wonderful little word found so often in Scripture. Verse 21 begins, “*But* now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known.” *But* is a word that reverses the whole direction of Paul’s diatribe. The word, “but,” brings his prosecution to an abrupt halt. What comes next, verses 22-26, is the greatest truth that has ever been revealed to the world. This passage is, perhaps, the pinnacle of all Scripture. Paul uses this word of transition to reveal God’s remedy for the world—a righteousness from God apart from the law. This remedy is found only in the gospel. “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith” (1:17). Keller writes,

No other place offers this. Outside of the gospel, we must develop a righteousness, and offer it to God, and say (hopefully and anxiously): Accept me. The gospel says that God has developed a perfect righteousness, and he offers it to us, and by it we are accepted. This is the uniqueness of the Christian gospel; and it reverses what every other religion and worldview, and even every human heart, believes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This righteousness from God was made known through both the Law and the Prophets (3:21), which means, essentially, the Old Testament. Throughout the OT, God revealed His plan to save the world through a coming Savior. This was revealed progressively in passages such as Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3; 15:6, Psalm 22, Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7; 53; Micah 5:2-5, and many others. The sacrificial system, Temple worship, and all accompanying ceremonies pointed to this one truth—salvation would come through this Savior to all who believe—“a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (1:17).

To clarify, no one unrighteous can come into God’s presence because God is both holy and righteous. God cannot and will not allow sin into His presence. Therefore, because man is sinful, he is in a dilemma, which God understands. He knew this even before He created man (1 Peter 1:18-20). But God provided a way for man to approach Him and even be in a right relationship with Him. What is the remedy? God’s own righteousness is imputed (credited or ascribed to one’s account) to the man or woman who believes in Christ and accepts His death on the cross as payment for his or her sins. This righteousness comes:

…through **faith** in **Jesus Christ** (v. 22)

…to all who **believe** (v. 22)

…for all have sinned and **fall short** of God’s glory (v. 23)

…and are **justified** freely (v. 24)

…by His **grace** (v. 24)

…through the **redemption** (v. 24)

…that came by **Christ Jesus** (v. 24)

…God presented him as a **sacrifice of atonement** (propitiation) (v. 25)

…through **faith** in his **blood** (v. 25)

…He did this to **demonstrate** his **justice** (v. 25)

…because in His forbearance, he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished (v. 25)

…He did it to demonstrate his **justice** at the present time (v. 26)

…so as to be just and the one who **justifies** those who have **faith in Jesus** (v. 26)

Wow! There is so much packed into these verses that summarize the entire Bible. God provides a way for sinners to be justified in His sight and made acceptable to Him. That’s incredible! There are many truths to digest from these verses.

1. This righteousness, God’s righteousness, flows from His very nature. God is perfect and holy. Everything He does is right and true. Thus, He can do no wrong. Moreover, God offers His righteousness to anyone who simply believes in Jesus Christ.
2. This righteousness “comes through faith in Jesus Christ.” Faith is only as good as the object of said faith. If someone believes his morality will earn him “right standing” with God, he is mistaken (Romans 3:10-12). Ultimately, his faith will be worth nothing because it is based on a false premise. Anyone who believes spiritual fervor and religious discipline will earn “right standing” with God is, likewise, mistaken (Isaiah 29:13), because the object of that person’s faith is his own works, which will prove pointless in the end. Again, one’s faith is only as good as its object. The object must be able to deliver whatever it promises.

Keller explains it like this,

President Eisenhower is reputed to have once said that America was “founded on a deeply-felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.” This is a typical view today; any other is seen as dogmatic and undemocratic. But it is the object of belief, rather than the belief itself, which is the crucial issue. I may have great, unshakeable faith in the ability of feathers strapped to my arms to fly me from the US to the UK; but I have put my faith in the wrong place. Equally, I may have just barely enough faith to board a transatlantic flight, trembling nervously as I do; and yet the object of my faith will accomplish what it promises. It is not faith that saves; it is not even faith in God that saves: it is faith in Jesus Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. This righteousness from God can be imputed to anyone’s account by simple faith (belief/trust) in Jesus Christ, the essence of the gospel. Available to anyone, this gospel is not exclusive. All can come to God through faith in His Son. That is the good news of the gospel, but there is only one way to come, and that is the way God provided.
2. Anyone who comes to God through faith in Christ must acknowledge his sinfulness. More often than not, this becomes the main obstacle. If not most people, any people do not really see themselves as sinners who need a Savior. Thus, they search for other ways to come to God—religion, education, good works, moral living, etc. Again, the problem is that these objects of faith cannot deliver what is needed—imputed righteousness.
3. In verses 24-25, Paul introduces three essential theological words: justification, redemption, and propitiation (sacrifice of atonement). Paul explains, [All who believe] “are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement [propitiation], through faith in his blood.”

**Justification** is a legal term. Paul uses this word to conjure an image of a courtroom. A sinner stands before the bar of God’s justice and is found guilty of a crime deserving death. But God, the Judge, offers a way out. If the defendant (sinner) is willing to believe and accept His Son’s death on the cross (“faith in his blood”), then God is willing to “declare him righteous” and forgive him of any and all sins (past, present, and future). Justification is a declaration whereby God declares the sinner righteous. In that moment, God imputes His righteousness to the s  
inner’s account.

Why is a holy and righteous God willing to do this for sinners? The answer is grace—the God   
of the Bible is a God of grace and mercy (Micah 7:18-19). In His *mercy*, He withholds judgment and condemnation. By His *grace*, He gives freely His unmerited favor to undeserving sinners who simply have faith in Jesus’ death on the cross as payment for their sins.

**Redemption** is a commercial term borrowed from the marketplace. Sometimes in the Old Testament, slaves were purchased and then set free. This is a picture of what Christ did on the cross. He paid the price, the ransom so that men who were enslaved to sin might be set free or redeemed. Christ was chosen before the foundations of the world to give his life as a ransom, payment, for our sins. This is what the cross is all about. Peter confirms this in 1 Peter 1:18-20, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the world’s creation but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God,   
who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”

**Sacrifice of atonement** or **propitiation** is a complicated phrase or word. The Greek word Paul uses here is *hilasterion* (v. 25). The NIV translates it as “sacrifice of atonement,” whereas the KJV and ESV translate it as “propitiation.” Some other modern translations, e.g., RSV and NEB, render it “expiation.” Expiation is the wiping away of wrongdoing, but propitiation goes further. It includes expiation and adds appeasement, or the turning away, of God’s wrath. Some theologians have a problem with the idea of wrath because they don’t like to think of God as wrathful. However, one must understand that God’s wrath flows from His love for us and is directed only towards and against all the evil that pervades our fallen world. God hates evil because evil is the root of all sin, and sin separates us from the God who loves us.

Jesus, although he knew no sin, and no sin was ever found in him, was made by God to be sin for our sake (2 Corinthians 5:21). How so? Through the principle of substitution, God imputed to, that is, counted towards, Christ, our sin. Therefore, Jesus received the penalty of sin for those who genuinely have faith in the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-3). By faith, one’s sin is imputed to Christ, just as his righteousness, his perfect obedience of the Law, is imputed to those who believe. This is the great exchange that took place at the cross for those who have faith in his sacrificial death. Thus, Jesus, as the sacrifice of atonement, bore the wrath of God in our place. His sacrificial and substitutional death satisfied God’s justice and appeased His wrath providing a covering for sinners who believe.

One of the great principles taught in the OT is the idea of substitutionary atonement pictured in the sacrificial system established by God through Moses and laid out in Leviticus. The people were to bring lambs or goats without defect to the Temple to be slaughtered. Then, the blood of the lambs/goats was poured out onto the altar. These sacrifices appeased God’s wrath toward the Israelites and his justice was satisfied. In turn, God forgave their sins.

In the NT, we learn that Jesus, as the perfect Lamb of God, became our substitutionary sacrifice. By faith, his death becomes our death (Romans 6:5-7). His sacrifice becomes our sacrifice. All of this is implied by the complex Greek term *hilasterion*. Stott writes,

According to the Christian revelation, God’s own great love propitiated his own holy wrath through the gift of his own dear Son, who took our place, bore our sin and died our death. Thus God himself gave himself to save us from himself. This is the righteous basis on which the righteous God can “righteous” the unrighteous without compromising his righteousness.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To summarize, via Christ’s sacrifice of atonement, God’s righteous and holy character was vindicated, and his justice was satisfied, enabling him to show mercy and forgiveness to those who genuinely have faith in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection.

1. God sent His Son to die on the cross as payment for our sins. He did this to demonstrate His justice because, in His forbearance, God left the sins of those from the Old Testament age unpunished. Consequently, the cross is the place where justice and mercy meet. At the cross, God’s justice was satisfied. As a result, God’s mercy and forgiveness could be extended to everyone.

In conclusion, a man’s salvation does not come as a result of his morality, innate goodness, or even due to his personal religious striving, but rather from the unmerited favor (grace) that God extends to those who place their trust in the one way He has provided—faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, no one has any basis for boastfulness. “A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (v. 28). God offers His grace to all—the Jew, the circumcised, and the Gentile, the uncircumcised. Bottom line: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (v. 22). And that is the gospel—God’s remedy for the world.

DAYS 1 and 2. Read Romans 3:21-26.

1. God gave the law to show that we can never earn salvation on our own. Then He revealed another way. What is this other way (vv. 21-22)?
   1. Read John 14:6 and Acts 4:12. What do you learn from these verses?
   2. What are some ways people try to come to God on their terms?
2. Verse 22 states, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all   
   who believe.” Explain.
   1. What does it mean to believe (John 1:12; 3:16; Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 10:9-10)?
3. Verse 23 states, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!”
   1. Define sin based upon this verse (James 1:14-1).
   2. Explain how the Law (Exodus 20) and Jesus Christ set the standard (Matthew 5:17)?
4. In your own words, define the following terms:
   1. Righteousness (Galatians 3:6)
   2. Justification (Titus 3:5-7)
   3. Redemption (Colossians 1:13-14)
   4. Sacrifice of atonement/propitiation (Hebrews 2:17; 9:11-14, 22, 24-28)
   5. Faith in his blood (Ephesians 1:7, 2:13; Colossians 1:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9)
   6. Justice

DAY 4 . Read Romans 3:21-26.

1. Verses 25-26 are about the justice of God. Paul explains that God sacrificed His own Son to demonstrate His justice. Furthermore, he states that God, in His forbearance, left the sins committed beforehand (before the cross) unpunished. Explain how Jesus’ death allowed God to uphold His standard of justice and, at the same time, justify those who have faith.
2. Read Luke 18:9-14. In verse 14, Jesus said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.” What distinguishes the tax collector from the religious Pharisee? (Hint: see verses 9, 13) What do you learn from this?

DAY 5. Read Romans 3:27-31.

1. Verse 27 states, “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.”
   1. Why do religious people tend to boast? (Hint: see Luke 18:9-14)
   2. Why should there be no boasting for those who are indeed in Christ
   3. What trait does God desire to see in his children (1 Peter 5:5)?
2. Read Acts 13:38-39. How are both Jew (circumcised) and Gentile (uncircumcised) justified by God (vv. 28-30)?
3. Verse 31 states, “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we   
   uphold the law.”
   1. How might Paul have been accused of nullifying the law?
   2. How do we, as Christians who come to God by faith alone, actually uphold the law?
4. What is one new truth you learned from this lesson?
5. (Personal Question) Have you been declared righteous by God? Do you really believe?   
   To what can you point in your life that shows you are a true believer?

1. Ibid., 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stott., 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)