**Romans**

***How to be a Christian without Being Religious!***

**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 makes it clear 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 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. The world has no defense. There appears to be no remedy. Every man’s life and character has been held up to the law and found wanting. And, if God had not acted, everyone would have been left in this condition—guilty and simply waiting for final judgment. 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 righteousness from God apart from law, 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, in 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 this 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 is essentially a reference to the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament, 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 the accompanying ceremonies pointed to this one truth that 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 be clear, 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. But God has provided a way for man to approach Him and even be in a right relationship with Him. God’s way provides the remedy. What is the remedy? God’s own righteousness is imputed (credited or ascribed to one’s account) to the man who believes in Christ and accepts His death on the cross as payment for his 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 present 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. These verses 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 is God’s righteousness. It flows from His very nature. Everything He does is right and true. He can do no wrong. He is perfect and holy. And, God offers this righteousness, His righteousness, to anyone who simply believes in Jesus Christ.
2. This righteousness “comes through faith in Jesus Christ.” Understand that one’s faith is only as good as the object of that faith. If someone believes that 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 dependent upon a concept or idea that is untrue. Anyone who believes spiritual fervor and religious discipline will earn a ‘right standing’ with God, likewise, is 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 the object of said faith. The object must be able to deliver whatever it promises.

Keller writes,

*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 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. It is important to note that this gospel is available to anyone. It is not exclusive. All can come to God through faith in His Son. That is the good news of the gospel. It is available to all. 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 to the gospel. Many people, if not *most* 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 extremely important 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 this declaration whereby God declares the sinner righteous. In that moment, God imputes His righteousness to the account of the sinner.

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. 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 so that men who were enslaved to sin might be set free or redeemed.

**Sacrifice of atonement** or **propitiation** is a complicated phrase or word. The Greek word that Paul uses here is *hilastrion* (v. 25). The NIV translates it “sacrifice of atonement,” whereas the KJV and ESV translate it “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 but also adds appeasement, or 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 and is directed only towards evil. God hates evil. Thus, Jesus was the sacrifice of atonement. In other words, His death satisfied God’s justice and appeased His wrath, thus providing a covering for sinners who believe. Jesus bore the wrath of God in our place. He was our substitute. All of this is implied by the complex Greek term *hilastrion*.

Stott writes,

*According to the Christian revelation, God’s 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)*

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 own morality, innate goodness, or even due to his own 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—both 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” (verse 22). And that is the gospel—God’s remedy for the world.

**DAY 1**

1. Read chapter 3 (pp. 36-41) in *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*.
   1. What is the difference between being paroled versus being fully pardoned by God? Which of these is true regarding Christians? Explain.
   2. How does Ridenour explain these terms:
2. Justified
3. Grace
4. Redemption
   1. Since believers are fully pardoned, do they have a right to sin at will or live any way they choose? Why or why not?

**DAYS 2 and 3 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 of the ways people try to come to God on their terms?
2. V. 22 states, “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Using your own words, explain this verse.
   1. What does it mean to believe (John 1:12; 3:16; Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 10:9-10)?
3. Based on v. 23, how would you define sin (James 1:14-15)?
4. In your own words, define the following terms:

Righteousness (Galatians 3:6)

Justification (Titus 3:5-7)

Redemption (Colossians 1:13-14)

Sacrifice of atonement/propitiation (Hebrews 2:17; 9:11-14, 22, 24-28)

Faith in his blood (Ephesians 1:7, 2:13; Colossians 1:20; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 5:9)

Justice

**DAY 4 Read Romans 3:21-26**

1. In vv. 25-26, Paul writes 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 own standard of justice and, at the same time, justify those who have faith.
2. Read Luke 18:9-14. In v. 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 verse 9) What do you learn from this?

**DAY 5 Read Romans 3:27-31**

1. V. 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 truly 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. V. 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 that you have learned from this lesson?
5. (Personal Question) Have you been declared righteous by God? Do you really believe? What can you point to 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)