



# THE MIRACLE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 3:21-31  
Seventh Message  
Gary Vanderet  
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The tragic events in Littleton, Colorado last week have had a profound impact on our nation. When death comes after a long and full life, it comes as a welcome guest, as with the dawning of a new day. When death comes after a long and painful illness, it often comes as a merciful friend. But when death comes in such a horrific and violent way, taking away teenagers, with all their potentialities unfulfilled and their years unrealized, we are left shattered.

I was struck again with the truth that when we reject God, we lose everything, and we become intellectually confused and morally darkened. The events of last week are a staggering reminder that all is not well with humanity. They are a sobering illustration of Romans 1, where Paul describes a world gone astray because it has given up the worship and love of God. There the apostle describes what happens to mankind when standards disappear and society begins to disintegrate: "being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents" (Rom 1:29-30). The wrath of God leaves man to himself, without restraints or inhibitions: senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless (Rom 1:31). The fact that we do not see more of this kind of violence and chaos is due solely to God's restraining grace.

It is significant that we come to these verses today in Romans, because in this book we find the only answer, the only hope for our hurting world. In the opening two and a half chapters, Paul has made—and sustained—the charge that all mankind is under the curse of sin. He has clearly shown that the entire human race is guilty. Each one of us has blown it. Here is how Eugene Peterson translates the apostle's conclusion to all that he has said, in 3:10-12:

*There's nobody living right, not even one,  
Nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.  
They've all taken the wrong turn:  
wandered down blind alleys.  
No one's living right;  
I can't find a single one.*

Paul summarizes this again in v. 23 of this chapter by saying, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The Old and New Testaments use a number of words to describe sin. This word which the apostle uses here means "to miss the mark." We miss the glory of God. We were created in his image and intended to dis-

play his glory, and we missed. "Glory" was used in the classical literature of Paul's day to refer to a person's worth, assets, wealth, or value. Glory is the essence of God's character. Now, if we are going to earn salvation, then we have to be exactly like Jesus Christ, who perfectly manifested God's character while here on earth. To say that we don't measure up is an understatement.

In contrast to our human condition is the divine character. God is holy and just. There is no sin in him. Sin is repulsive to God. He hates it. That may come as a surprise to some. We are inclined to think that God is easy-going and tolerant, and we are shocked at his reaction to sin in both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible uses some interesting metaphors to describe how much God hates sin. One says that sin makes him sick to his stomach. God says of a particular church in the Book of Revelation, "You make me sick to my stomach. I want to throw up." God is holy and just and righteous. He keeps his distance from sin. That is the picture we get from the Ark in the Old Testament. The people did not just walk up to the ark. When the priests picked it up and placed it on their shoulders, the people followed a thousand yards, more than half a mile, behind. God was communicating that he is separate from sin.

So we are confronted with a dilemma, a problem that needs a solution. God loves sinners, but he has to judge sin. We are sinful, and as a result are separated from God. But he loves us desperately. How then can we put together God's justice and love? How can he judge sin and yet justify sinners at the same time?

Someone might ask, "Why doesn't God declare an amnesty?" "Amnesty" comes from the word amnesia. Why doesn't God forget our sin and forgive it? is the point. But that simply would not work. That is not our concept of justice in the world. What about the drug dealer who destroys young people, simply for money? What about the murders and mayhem of last week? John Stott comments that if we say that God should just forgive, "we understand neither the gravity of sin nor the majesty of God." That is the predicament.

Given this dilemma, we come now to what one commentator calls the great divide of Paul's letter to the Romans. Donald Grey Barnhouse superinscribed a drawing of a heart over these verses in his Bible because, he said, "I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the Bible."<sup>1</sup> These verses are certainly the turning point in this book. I hope they will mark a turning point in

your life, too.

The solution to the dilemma is given in these verses. Romans 3:21-26:

**But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NASB)**

Here Paul describes the miraculous arrangement whereby sinners are made just before a holy God. The word righteousness is used a number of times in these verses. Here is the answer to the dilemma of man's sin and God's holiness: the *righteousness* of God. God is righteous. He always does what is right. And that righteousness is clearly seen in the cross of Christ. It was there that God's righteousness was made known. There God took the initiative to give us a righteous status in his sight. It was there that he saved us.

What does that mean? Paul uses three terms to help us understand what happened at the cross.

The first word is *justification*: "being justified as a gift by His grace" (verse 24). The second word is *redemption*: "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (verse 24). The third word is *propitiation*: "whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed" (verse 25). So Paul uses these three words to describe how God solved the dilemma of judging sin and justifying sinners at the same time. God accomplished this by justifying us, redeeming us, and atoning for our sins. These theological words are hard for us to understand, but Paul's readers would have understood them. In his day, justification was not a theological, but a legal term. Redemption was a term from the market place. The third term, propitiation, was the only one that had religious connotations.

Justification is a legal term. There is a catchy phrase that some use to define it: "Just as if I've never sinned," they say. That is helpful, but it is not inclusive enough. The word is actually the equivalent of the legal pronouncement, "Not guilty." Justification implies more than just a pardon. It has not merely a negative but a positive aspect, too. Christians are given a righteous status, and now have favor with God. When we look back on our lives and review all the things we have said

and done, all the cruel acts and the pain we have inflicted on others, we wonder how a righteous and just God could declare us not guilty. Well, it is because, as Paul puts it in verse 24, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." God put our guilt upon the Lord Jesus. He bore our sins in his own body on the cross. He paid for them so that we don't have to. He took the rap. He bore the consequences. Someone had to pay for sin. God did not want to send us to hell, so he sent his Son to hell that our sins could be paid for and we could be redeemed.

Dave Roper illustrates the point in this way. Suppose I defraud someone and get caught. There is no question about my wrongdoing, so I stand before the court and plead guilty. The judge sentences me to pay a ten-million dollar fine, slams the gavel down, and goes into his chambers. How am I going to pay that fine? I am guilty, the fine is just, but I can't pay. Then the judge returns. He doesn't have his robes on anymore. He comes around to the front of his desk, and he has his checkbook out. He writes a check for ten million one hundred dollars, with my name on it, and he hands the check to the clerk of the court and says, "This is to pay his fine. I am taking the responsibility of paying the consequences for this man's evil act." That is justification. I am declared "Not guilty," because of the sacrifice of the judge. The extra hundred dollars is for me to take my wife out to dinner, because justification demands a celebration! The judge paid the price.

The second word is redemption. God redeemed us. In Paul's day, slaves were captured in war and taken to Rome and sold. They would stand there, naked and in chains, and buyers would barter for them. Now, suppose you were on that auction block and someone in the crowd wanted to buy you. He kept bidding and raising the price until finally he bought you for an exorbitant price. Then, after the auction, he removed your chains and handed you a new wardrobe. You asked him, "What do you want me to do?" and he replied, "You are free." "But," you responded, "I thought I was your slave. You just purchased me." And he said, "That's right. I did. But you are free, because I have bought you and set you free." That is what redemption means. We could not free ourselves, we were slaves to our own sin and guilt, but God redeemed us. He bought us out of captivity—and it cost him immeasurably: the price was the life of his Son.

The third word is propitiation (or atonement, NIV). The word means "to appease the wrath of the gods." Some people are embarrassed or even shocked by that word. They feel it doesn't seem right to have to placate God's anger, so they substitute the word expiation, meaning, to wipe away sin, to take away sin. Both of those ideas are present here. Paul is describing God's answer to our problem, which is not only our sin, but God's holiness, and his wrath upon sin. John Stott put it this way: "Where there is divine wrath, there is the need to avert it."<sup>2</sup>

This idea of appeasing the wrath of God was well known in the ancient world. In pagan religions, everyone understood that the gods were angry and had to be appeased. But, unlike the pagan gods which demanded sacrifice of children, God sacrificed his own Son. He was the sacrifice, the propitiation, the expiation, the atonement for our sins. Many translations use the word atonement because this is the term that is used in Exodus 25 concerning the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the high and holy day for Jews. On that day the sins of the people are atoned for, and the wrath of God is appeased.

And so it was through the cross of Christ that God justified us, that he redeemed us, that he atoned for our sins. As Isaiah put it: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6, NIV). This was not an afterthought. As Paul declares in verse 21, the cross was witnessed to by the law and the prophets. This was planned from the foundation of the world: that the Son of God would come as the Lamb of God to take away our sins.

Finally, Paul sets out the means by which we can enjoy this salvation. It is simply to believe it. It is by faith. That idea is communicated in a number of ways in these verses from chapter 3. In fact, the word faith is used nine times here:

*"The righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe"* (verse 22).

*"Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith"* (verse 25).

*"That he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"* (verse 26).

*"For we maintain a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law"* (verse 28).

This righteousness that we receive is apart from Law. We do not earn it; it is a gift. We cannot earn it by doing our best to be pleasing to God. Anyone who approaches God on those terms has already failed. There is no way anyone can measure up to God's standards. The sweetest, dearest little old lady you know cannot, because God knows her heart. The key to having the righteousness of God is faith. When Martin Luther translated verse 28 into German, he felt the sense of it so strongly that he added the word, "faith alone."

And, as Paul says in verse 26, it is not just faith in general. Many people have a vague belief in God. They have faith that everything has a purpose and everything will work out. But Paul declares that it is by faith in Jesus: faith in his person and work, that he bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we do not have to pay the consequences. We can't earn it or contribute to it in any way whatsoever.

This is what separates Christianity from all other religions. "No other system, ideology or religion proclaims a free forgiveness and a new life to those who have done nothing to deserve it but a lot to deserve judgment instead."<sup>3</sup> Every other religion is based on human achievement in one way or another, but Christianity is based on divine accomplishment. It is not a religion at all. It is the good news that God's grace has turned away his wrath; that God's Son has died our death, and bore our judgment, and there is nothing left for us to do. We can't pay the bill. We can't even leave the tip. The only function faith has is to receive this gift that God's grace offers. It doesn't cost us anything because it cost God everything.

That is why Paul concludes, in verses 27-31:

**Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.**

**Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.**

Who can boast? No one, absolutely no one. How can we boast when we receive the gift of grace without any merit on our part? Thus, any ground for self-righteousness is done away with. This is why self-righteousness is the ugliest sin among Christians. When we look down on other people, imagining that we are better than they, then we have denied what God has done for us. All boasting is excluded. The only ground of acceptance is the gift of grace.

And no one, neither Jew nor Gentile, is excluded from grace. No special privilege or favor counts in God's sight. God has no most-favored-nation. Salvation is the same for everyone. Paul argues: "Is God the God of Jews only? Then there must be two Gods—one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. But that cannot be; there is only one God; God is one." Therefore, God is equally the God of the Gentiles and the God of the Jews, because both Jew and Gentile must come on exactly the same grounds. This is the wonderful thing about the gospel. All mankind is on the same level—guilty, and in need of grace. No one can stand on any basis other than the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Justification is truly a miracle. It is my prayer that you will receive and live in this marvelous gift of grace.

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1. D. G. Barnhouse, *God's Remedy, God's River* (Scripture Truth) 2:6.
2. John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 114.
3. Stott, 118.