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Romans 3:21-31
Seventh Message
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HOW MEN ARE DECLARED RIGHT BEFORE GOD

How many of you remember getting your first traffic ticket? I was nineteen when I received my first. It happened when my fraternity brother and I drove to see our girlfriends for a weekend. We left Stanford University at 3:00 in the morning and headed down the freeway for San Diego. Since my heart was pumped, my foot hit the floorboard! We must have been doing 85 miles per hour when I saw the red light flashing in my rearview mirror. My heart sank. When I rolled down my window, the patrolman yelled at me, "Do you always drive like that?!" I was petrified!

When I found out how much my ticket would cost me, a friend said I ought to take my case to court where they tend to be more lenient. I immediately signed up for a court date, and my imagination began to manufacture wonderful excuses for my innocence. First of all, my tires were oversized which caused my speedometer to be off by five miles per hour. Second, there were no other cars on the road. Finally, this was my first offense. Surely the judge would see my good heart and overlook my breach of law.

With my excuses memorized, I entered the courtroom. When the officer who gave me the ticket entered, he must have stood 6 feet tall at least! His presence meant there would be an impartial witness to testify against me. Then I listened to the judge as he spoke to other offenders. He was anything but tolerant of traffic violators.

Before my case came up, a bailiff announced, "We have a special provision available which will remove your ticket from your record. If you attend traffic school for six weeks and complete the course successfully, the ticket will be erased. In order to receive this provision, you must reverse your plea from innocent to guilty. How many would like to do that?" I reviewed my flimsy excuses, looked at the policeman in front of me and the judge at his bench, and quickly shot up my hand. What a relief it was not to have to face that judge!

This is where we are in the book of Romans. Paul has placed all of humanity before the throne of God to try our cases. Will we be justified or condemned? Will God deem us right, or will he uphold our guilt? Many of us view God in the same way I approached that traffic judge. We think we have legitimate excuses for our sin. And we think God is a "good ol' boy" who will overlook our offenses in his southern hospitality and will readily forgive us. We assume that forgiveness is no problem!

In the first three chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul has given a different picture of this Judge. When we ascend into God's courthouse, we see the difference immediately. First, in his halls there is the presence of a holy justice which is so glorious none dare speak. And each step which leads up to courthouse has one of the ten commandments inscribed in it. The last one before entering the court reads, "You shall not covet." At the top of the stairs, we face the two pillars of justice. One is Strength and the other Truth. These pillars rise into the sky and uphold the vault of the heavens and go deep into the earth, for they are the foundational truth of God's kingdom

and throne. As we pass between the pillars, we see a series of transparent doors. On them is the verse from Proverbs: "The Lord weighs the heart." These doors represent the transparency of our hearts. There is nothing hidden from this righteous Judge who judges the deeds and the motives of the heart. As we enter the room where our case will be tried, others warn us that this holy Judge has never deviated from his righteous statutes, not even once. They quote Exodus 23 in which this Judge says, "I will not acquit the guilty." Even the Judge's gavel carries an inscription from Romans: "There is not one righteous, not even one."

Within this same heavenly courtroom, every case is tried. As we have seen in Romans, no man can solve the issue of his own forgiveness or the problem of his own sin. God's justice is too great, and man's sin is too overwhelming. It is at this point the apostle Paul brings another person to the stand—God himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

God must enter the stage of human history to deal with the problem of justice and forgiveness. Horace, the Roman poet, once advised the writers of Greek tragedies: "Do not bring a god on to the stage unless the problem is one that deserves a god to solve it." When Martin Luther read Romans, he said this is such a case. Our problem is so great none other than God can solve it.

Romans 3:21-31 will reveal how we as sinners can obtain a righteous standing before this holy God. Paul will answer four questions. First he will tell us how this righteous standing has been manifested. Then he will answer how it is obtained. Third, he will look at what the basis is for this righteousness. The fourth question asks what the significant results of this standing are. To help us understand his answers, Paul will guide us from God's courtroom to a slave market and then to the inner court of a temple.

I. How Has Righteousness By Faith Been Manifested (3:21-22)

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... (NASB)

How is a man to be justified? How does he obtain the legal declaration that he had been made right with God, having been forgiven and reinstated? Paul says that justification by faith was the theme of the Old Testament. It was not an afterthought or Plan B formulated upon the failure of Plan A. Rather, the cross of Christ was the focus and direction of the Hebrew Scriptures from the beginning.

This justification was witnessed by the Law and the prophets. In fact, there is an entire book in the Law dedicated to teaching us how man can be set right by faith. This is Leviticus, the explanation of the sacrificial system. Any Jew living in Jerusalem would have noticed every morning and evening the blood that covered the altar

through the activity of the priests. Blood, blood, blood! He knew that to placate the wrath of an angry God directed at sin the blood of an innocent victim had to be shed. God could not be approached without the blood.

The prophets took this even further by saying that functions of the sacrifice and the priest would come together in the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah himself. Isaiah 53:4-6 makes this doctrine of atonement explicitly clear:

Surely our griefs he Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our peace fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

This passage is such a clear witness to the cross of Christ that the Jews took it out of the synagogue readings because the early Christians effectively used it to support the fact that Jesus was the Messiah.

Thus, the doctrine of justification by faith was written in the Law and the prophets. And it became publicly manifest in the cross of Christ.

How do we get this declaration of righteousness? Paul tells us in verses 22-24.

II. How Is Justification Obtained? (3:22-24)

...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...

How are we justified? Apart from works! Justification is given freely and by grace through faith to everyone who will believe. Therefore, faith in the work of another causes man to stand "right" before God. There are no exemptions to this because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

This makes the transfiguration of Jesus very significant because through it God declared Jesus to be without sin. In other words, Jesus had loved God with his whole heart and had kept the Law perfectly. In being transfigured, Jesus revealed that he did not need to die. He could have walked off into glory. But instead, he came down off that mountain and died on a cross in our place. As a result, he can freely give us the life that was his possession as a gift.

This means of justification occurs in reverse of the normal judgment process. For example, in chapter 2 Paul expressed the Jewish hope that through performing good works man might get a pronouncement of righteousness at the final judgment. But God reverses this process. When we receive Christ by faith, he casts us forward to the judgment and gives us our righteousness before we have done any good works. The good works follow by grace. What a great way to live!

When I worked with college students at Stanford, I saw the incredible pressure to perform which they faced. I had the joy of telling them another way of being deemed "right," and I used an example

which spoke to their specific need. I said, "Imagine walking into your first class on opening day, and the professor hands you a card with your grade already on it: A+. All of your classes follow the same pattern. Can you imagine the difference that would make for you? The professor would then add, 'During this course, I am going to make you into that A student, and you cannot leave until we are done!'" What assurance that would give any student!

This is how justification is obtained. It is a free gift by faith in Jesus Christ. Many object to this idea whenever we share the gospel of Christ. People say, "That kind of forgiveness is cheap!...It compromises the justice of God!...How can you be forgiven with just a wave of the hand?" Because of these objections, Paul goes further and explains the basis for this justification by faith.

III. What is the Basis for Justification? (3:24-26)

The basis of this gift has two parts. It is based upon the work of the Son in redemption, and it is based on the work of the Father in propitiation. The first deals with the cost and the second with the justice of God.

Verses 24-25 speak of the work of the Son:

...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.

To help us, Paul takes us out of the courtroom to the squalor of a slave market. The term "redemption" did not need to be defined for either the Greeks or the Jews, for it was deeply imbedded in both their histories. They were keenly aware of the plight of slavery. In the Greek wars, the victors would round up the vanquished and carry them off as slaves. If some of them were prominent citizens, the captors would request money for their release from the people left behind. In other words, because these people were in the grips of the enemy, they were helpless to free themselves. Without the ransom price, they would be slaves forever.

The Jews also knew about slavery. It was not by accident that for four hundred years they endured the cruel treatment of Pharaoh. And they knew that their redemption was not cheap. The ransom price for their freedom was the shedding of blood. In response to their freedom, they were to give their heart to the Lord in love and appreciation.

In both of these situations, the analogy to the moral plight of all mankind is clearly seen. The Scriptures teach that all men are under the bondage of sin and death. And sin is a horrible taskmaster.

We are wrong if we think that sin leads to freedom. When we throw off the shackles of self-restraint and do whatever we want, we think we are experiencing freedom. But we always end up doing something that is tainted with wickedness. We never throw off self-restraint in order to love people or to be patient or forgiving. Instead we do it to get drunk, to become lustful or to exercise arrogance or anger. The best man can do with the shackles of sin upon his heart is to plate them with silver and gold and call them freedom.

Our plight is indeed horrible! In fact, it is so horrible that nothing less than the blood of Christ can set us free. Therefore, the ransom price that freed me from my slavery was none other than God-become-flesh, dying on a cross, the agony of hell itself. The shedding of his blood bought my freedom.

As a result, this Redeemer has proprietary rights over his people. This is the basis for the Lordship of Christ in the New Testament.

Many try to say, “Jesus is my Savior, but I do not want him as my Lord.” Do you realize what you are saying? He who gave his life cannot save you if you only want his salvation and not his Lordship. He can only save you when he is your Lord, when you appropriate his blood in your life.

This is the answer to our generation’s lack of self-esteem. We are the generation of child, emotional and parental abuse. Many people are carrying hidden scars. Yet even though your parents may not have loved you or your spouse may not love you, God does love you. He loved you enough to die for you. This is our source for self-esteem.

God is not like Daddy Warbucks who writes a “small” check out of his vast riches in order to redeem you. Sometimes we think God only spent some of his infinite resources to get us back. But our redemption cost him everything! He only had one Son. He went bankrupt to buy us. Our redemption was anything but cheap.

Our eldest daughter Becky has a strong sense of self-worth. She glories in who she is partly because of the circumstances through which she came to us. We often review her story in praise to our Lord, for she came to us through adoption after our first two children died. She knows what a gift she is. The other day when I disciplined her, I slipped and said, “Becky, you are worthless!” She smiled back and said, “No, Daddy. I’m not worthless. I’m priceless!” (So much for that rebuke.) You can say the same thing!

Justification by faith also has its basis in the work of the Father in propitiation. Now Paul takes us from the slave market to the holy temple. As we approach it, we find the glory, light and majesty of God to be so great that he is unapproachable. Because of our sin, this glory creates fear. Therefore, we remain distant, afraid that God’s wrath will consume our sin and us along with it.

How can a holy God in his glorious temple relate to sinful man? The answer is found in the word “propitiation” which focuses on the wrath of God being placated by the cross. On that day, the only day in human history save the second coming, God’s justice and holiness were fully satisfied.

Many modern theologians have resisted this term because they do not consider God to be wrathful. To resolve their dilemma, they have changed the word to “expiation” which focuses solely on the atonement for sin. It does not deal with the wrath of God. But God is wrathful. In chapter 1, Paul said that the wrath of God is revealed among men and that it will be poured out on the final judgment day. And the cross reveals the full extent of his wrath.

But who initiates propitiation, the satisfaction for the wrath of God? Who brings the gift to pacify God’s anger? As John Stott says in *The Cross of Christ*:

...the gospel begins with the outspoken assertion that nothing we can do, say, offer or even contribute can compensate for our sins or turn away God’s anger. There is no possibility of persuading, cajoling or bribing God to forgive us, for we deserve nothing at his hands but judgment...the initiative has been taken by God himself in his sheer mercy and grace...God’s love is the source, not the consequence, of the atonement.

There is nothing we can do to pacify God’s anger. We deserve nothing but judgment. All we can contribute is our sin. God the Father took the initiative to deal with his own wrath.

Behind the cross is the love of the Father. What was his gift or sacrifice?

...nothing less than God Himself. Father beating His own son, spitting upon Him, driving the nails, mocking him, crown of thorns, finally abandoning to hell and powers of darkness. “Only God, our Lord and Creator, could stand surety for us, could take our place, could suffer eternal death in our stead as the consequence of our sin in such a way that it was finally suffered and overcome.” (Karl Barth)

When Jesus cried, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me),” this was not the work of cruel men. This was the Son enduring the wrath of an angry Father which we deserved and should have faced. When he cried out on the cross, he was facing hell.

We are never told in the Scriptures what this cost the Father, how much it must have hurt him. Those of you who have lost children can identify with him. You know what it costs to lose a loved one, especially a child. Yet the Father never tells us about this. The only verse which comes close to revealing the heart the Father is 2 Samuel 18:33 where David mourns the loss of his unrighteous son: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” How much more must the Father have grieved.

On the cross, the wrath of God was satisfied. Jesus paid our penalty in full. That we might clearly understand this, Paul tells us that God made public the event of propitiation which in the Old Testament occurred secretly once a year inside the Holy of Holies through the high priest sprinkling blood on the mercy seat. When Christ died, the veil was torn in two, and the propitiation was visible in the marketplace. God was publicly declaring, “I am satisfied!” What a mockery we make of the cross when we try to do penance for our sins or punish ourselves. God is satisfied. Believe it!

Once his justice was satisfied, God was free to justify us. Look at verse 26:

...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.

The end result is that both God and the sinner are righteous. That is amazing! How can a righteous God acquit the guilty and still be righteous? Do you realize the cosmic dimensions of what occurred on that cross? In pouring out his wrath, God could then justify you and me.

If you comprehend the holiness, glory and justice of God, this creates fear by itself. But now as we observe the cross of Christ, we can see that his love flows so deep he chose to satisfy his own justice. All the barriers between God and man have been broken down in the temple. And we no longer worship in a cold temple of silver, gold or concrete. Our temple is made of living stones—a loving, caring community of people. We can even call it “home.” All of this is achieved through propitiation.

In summary, we see that justification by faith is not cheap, nor does it compromise the justice of God. We can boldly say, “I am justified! I am redeemed! God is satisfied!”

Paul concludes this section of the heart of the gospel by giving us the significant results of justification. This is where the rubber meets the road. If we believe in justification by faith, three things will happen to us. Here is the test of true belief.

IV. What are the Significant Results (3:27-31)

The first result is found in verses 27-28:

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 Law.

When we reverse our plea, admit our guilt and accept the work of Christ, all possibility for pride is ended. The cross destroys all human pride because it declares that man can contribute nothing to his salvation. All we contributed was our sin. John Stott says this in another way:

The doctrine of substitution affirms not only a fact (God in Christ substituted himself for us) but its necessity (there was no other way by which God's holy love could be satisfied and rebellious human beings could be saved). Therefore, as we stand before the cross, we begin to gain a clear view both of God and of ourselves, especially in relation to each other. Instead of inflicting upon us the judgment we deserved, God in Christ endured it in our place. Hell is the only alternative. This is the 'scandal', the stumbling-block, of the cross. For our proud hearts rebel against it. We cannot bear to acknowledge either the seriousness of our sin and guilt or our utter indebtedness to the cross. Surely, we say, there must be something we can do, or at least contribute, in order to make amends? If not, we often give the impression that we would rather suffer our own punishment than the humiliation of seeing God through Christ bear it in our place.

If you are still arrogant, this is a sign that you do not understand the gospel. Acknowledgement of the cross always results in humility.

Secondly, the cross destroys prejudice. It works on horizontal as well as vertical relationships. Paul says in verses 29-30:

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also—if indeed God is one—and He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

The doctrine of justification by faith demonstrates that God is not just the God of the Jews but also of the Gentiles. All mankind approaches him on the same basis. How can we see ourselves as better than someone else when we are all invited to this party by grace? The greatest prejudicial barrier throughout history has been that between Jew and Gentile. When the gospel breaks it down, no other barriers are left. We are all sinners. We are all bankrupt, and we are all invited to partake of the same salvation. This should change the way we look at people.

The third result of justification is the change in our relationship to the Law. Paul concludes:

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

Have the pillars of justice been compromised by the righteous judge declaring us righteous? Has the Old Covenant been undermined with its blessing to the righteous and its curse to the wicked? Paul says no. The curse was taken by Jesus. As a result, the gift of righteousness was given to him and is available to us as well. Through his substitution, the penalty of sin was fully paid, and justice was satisfied.

Once God deems us to be right, he then causes us to be right. He makes us righteous. This is seen in the changes that occur after our conversion. The Law no longer has the same effect upon us as it did before. When we read it before, it killed us, for it produced sin of every kind. Now when we read the Law with our converted hearts, as the writer of Psalm 119 says, the spiritual words produce spiritual life and the power to change. This is far more than the law written on stones could ever do.

Righteousness even gives us taste! Have you ever tasted a rotten egg? You do not need a law in your house saying not to eat rotten eggs. Our taste-buds are tuned well enough to know better than to eat a rotten egg. The same principle is true for the converted heart. When the law enters our hearts, our taste for sin changes. We gain a higher level of spiritual sensitivity which enables us to make righteous judgments. Thus, as Paul says, the Law is not set aside, it is fulfilled.

God has declared me right in his high court of holiness. Then he redeemed me with his own blood and declared that his justice has been satisfied. I will conclude with two exhortations. First, if you have not accepted this gospel, how can you reject such a love? You will never find this kind of love any place else. The writer of Hebrews says:

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy...How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?...It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 2:3; 10:28, 29, 31)

Secondly, to those of you who accept this justification by faith, I hope this message has encouraged you to cultivate your spiritual affections with Jesus Christ. On the one hand, you should fear him as you see him in all his holiness. Remember he is uncompromising toward sin. But this kind of fear alone repels. Our sin is unfathomable, but so is his love. When you contemplate the cross, that love draws you into the intimacy of his presence. The result of both of these affections is holy love. May it be ours in fullest measure.

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