

WE ARE JUSTIFIED THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

Romans 3:21-31

Key Verse: 3:24

“... and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

In our Romans study thus far, we learned that we human beings have sinned against God and all of us are under his righteous judgment. Paul declared in Romans 3:10, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” Everyone is infected with a terminal disease called sin. Everyone has fallen and no one is able to get up on his or her own. So, is there hope for us? The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” Suppose that a CDC official announced today that the Ebola virus can spread through the cell phone transmissions and that every single person of the world is infected with it. Then he says, “We have good news. There is a cure for the disease!” He would certainly get our attention. Now, spiritually speaking, we know that sin is much worse than Ebola. It brings an eternal death to our souls. Let us listen to what St. Paul says about the cure to this terrible sickness.

First, “But now, the righteousness of God.” Look at verses 21-23. *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ...* Verse 21 begins with the words, “But now ...”—two words that signal a hope for the mankind. Paul’s indictment of the sinful mankind had been systematic and thorough. People turned against their Creator. In their foolishness, they worshiped man-made things instead of God. They abandoned God and followed their sinful nature. They not only actively committed sins but also encouraged others to do the same. They invented new ways to sin. No one is innocent before God--neither the Jews nor the Gentiles. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (23). Each of us was measured in God’s scale and was found to be lacking by the righteous standard of God (“glory” in verse 23 means “weight”; cf. Dan 5:27). Everyone deserves God’s righteous judgment. But now, in his mercy, God made a way to justify sinners by his one-sided grace. Apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed. God opened a way for sinners like us to have the righteousness, that is, a “right relationship with God” or “to be right with God.” This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (22). Jesus is the personification of the righteousness of God.

Actually, God had promised this righteousness a long time ago in the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets testified to this righteousness, that is, the coming of Jesus Christ. Beginning as early as in Genesis 3, God gave the promise to send his Son to be the Savior of the world. There are many references to this promise in the Old Testament. For example, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied: “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will

live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior” (Jer 33:14-16). And this promise was not just for the Jews. It was for the Gentiles as well. Paul says in Galatians 3: The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you” (Gal 3:8). Jesus came to fulfill this long term redemptive plan. God took the initiative to reconcile with sinners. This is how the Living Bible paraphrases verses 21-22: But now God has shown us a different way to heaven—not by “being good enough” and trying to keep his laws, but by a new way (though not new, really, for the Scriptures told about it long ago). Now God says he will accept and acquit us—declare us “not guilty”—if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we have been like.

Second, “justified freely by his grace.” Let us read verse 24. ... *and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* This is our key verse for the passage today. It says that all people are justified freely by the grace of God. We are declared “not guilty” even though we are in fact guilty as charged. The Greek word for “justified” (δικαιόω (dikaioó)) is a legal term that means to declare righteous or to show what is right. It means we sinners are cleared of all charges and punishment related to our sins. Our criminal record is expunged as if we did not commit the sins. We have a clean slate. We have a second chance in life!

Amazingly, this justification is given to us as a free gift from God. We are justified freely by the grace of God. We don’t have to do anything, not even a community service to receive the forgiveness of our sins. Because it’s impossible for sinners to achieve the righteousness on their own, God made it easy for them. He made it a free gift. Sadly, people who are proud have a difficult time in accepting this free gift. They say, “Do you mean to say that I have done something really bad to deserve a death penalty, and God says you are forgiven and you can go home? Just like that? It doesn’t sound right.” They feel they have to do something on their own to deserve a wonderful gift like that. I heard that the ready-made cake mix did not sell when it first came out. People were uneasy to think that they could make a cake by only adding water. The company realized this by doing some market research, and they came up with a simple solution. They required that an egg be added to the cake mix. And it began to sell like a hot cake. The forgiveness of our sins is, of course, much more than baking a cake. So we sinners feel we should do something to deserve the forgiveness. A man came to church and asked the pastor the question, “What should I do to receive salvation?” The pastor told him, “Young man, it is too late.” Dismayed, the man said, “You mean it’s too late for me to be saved?” The pastor answered, “No, no. It’s too late for you to do anything. Jesus had already done everything for your salvation.” This is true. Just before he died on the cross, Jesus declared, “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). There is nothing we can do to merit our salvation. We are justified freely by his grace.

Verse 24 also says that the grace of our salvation is given to us through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. The Greek word for “redemption” (ἀπολύτρωσις (apolutrósis)) was a term used in the slave market in Paul’s time. Literally it meant to purchase a slave from his owner by paying a payment for his life. We used to be slaves to sin and death. But Jesus rescued us from our slavery by paying the price of redemption

with his own blood, as we will discuss more in verse 25. We are justified freely by God's grace, but we should never think that his grace is cheap. It was not cost-free on the part of God. In fact, it was very costly to him. He paid the most expensive price -- the life of his one and only Son. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son to save us from our sins. We could never pay the price on our own. So God gave us the grace for free. But the cost to him was beyond our understanding. Indeed, God's love for us is beyond our comprehension. And whether we understand it or not, our response should be a heart-felt thanksgiving to him. We are thankful when we receive a small birthday gift from someone. But the gift from God is eternal life in heaven. This is the most precious gift we will ever receive in our life. We cannot praise God enough even if we thank him every single minute of our lives.

Now if you are still not amazed by the grace of God, if you somehow think you don't owe Jesus too much because you are a pretty good person, consider this. Let's say you are indeed a pretty decent person. Your sins are relatively minor--some unintentional lies here and there, some jealousy, some hatred, and a few prideful moments. You never murdered anyone and never committed adultery, except for some lustful desires. But we should know that sin is sin whether it is big or small. All sin makes us sinners. All sin separates us from God, cutting us off from the source of our life. All sin leads us to death, no matter how small it may be. This is the reason why no one can be declared righteous by the works of the law (28; 3:20). Self-justification doesn't work. The only way for us to be right with God is to come to Jesus by faith.

Let us think about what our Lord Jesus did in order to give us the free gift of salvation. Verse 25a reads: *God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.* It says that we are justified when we believe in Jesus because he paid the price of our sins by shedding his blood on the cross. We are made right with God when we put our faith in Christ who shed his blood on the cross. Why the blood? It is because in order to give us a new life, Jesus had to pay the price of our sins with his own life. Blood represents life. Blood is so important to our life that it is mentioned about 700 times in the Bible. Leviticus 17:11 says: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, ... it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." So Hebrews 9:22 declares: "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Now we know why Jesus had to shed his blood for us. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from our sins. We are justified when we believe in the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus has the power to make us new persons in God.

Look at verses 25b-26. *He did this to **demonstrate his righteousness**, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed **beforehand** unpunished—he did it to **demonstrate his righteousness** at the **present time**, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* It is not immediately clear what St. Paul is trying to teach us in these verses. Perhaps it is about the salvation of the people who believed in God before the coming of Jesus. When the Jewish audience heard the message that everyone who believes in Jesus is justified, one question came to their minds quickly. What about the people who had died before Jesus came to make a sacrifice of atonement for them? It would certainly be unfair if God condemned them just because they were born before the time of Jesus. On the other hand, if God saved

them without Jesus, why did Jesus have to come to sacrifice himself to save sinners? For example, if Abraham was justified by his faith in God without Jesus (as we will learn in Romans 4), why couldn't God save everyone in the same way? One version of the Bible (NLT) translates these verses in this way: "This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus." This means that all sinners, both the Old Testament and New Testament people, are saved by faith in Jesus. The difference is that the Old Testament believers were saved when they believed in the promise of God that Jesus would come someday to pay for their sins by shedding his blood. Jesus told the Jews: "Your father Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56, NLT). On the other hand, we who live in the New Testament period are privileged to know and believe that Jesus came to this world, just as God had promised, and gave his life on the cross to redeem us. Indeed, through Jesus, God demonstrated his righteousness to all peoples of past and present!

Third, boasting is excluded (27-31). Since the grace of salvation is given to us freely when we believe in Jesus, no one can boast that they deserve to be saved. Paul says in verse 27. *"Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith"* (cf. NIV 84: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith"; the Greek term for law, *nomos* (νόμος), can refer to law as a general principle.) We cannot earn even 1% of our salvation by our own effort. And this is by design, I believe. If we are able to earn a fraction of our salvation by our own effort, we would say things like, "Yes, God saved me, but I made a contribution to my salvation. I deserve to be saved." We would become proud before God which takes us to the original sin of pride and ingratitude (Ro 1:21). Instead, we are saved by God's grace alone. Our only response to him is "Thank you and praise the Lord!"

Look at verses 28-30. *For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.* God justifies all sinners, both the Jews (the circumcised) and the Gentiles (the uncircumcised) through the same faith in Jesus Christ. God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles. There is no difference (22b). All have sinned (23) and all need Jesus as the Savior. Faith is universal.

Finally, Paul says in verse 31. *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.* We are saved by faith in Jesus, apart from the works of the law. So how do we uphold the law by faith? At first glance, this statement sounds contradictory. I think we can answer this in a couple of ways. The law requires that sin must be punished. The righteous God cannot just sweep sin under the rug and say, "Don't worry about it." We have sinned and we must be punished. And indeed, Jesus was punished on our behalf. Jesus paid the price of our sins with his blood. The law was fulfilled when Jesus died in our place. In this sense, our faith in Jesus upholds the law. Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not

come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Mt 5:17). Another way we uphold the law is that, knowing we are saved by the grace of God, we obey the law of God. We know that our moral conducts cannot earn any points for our salvation. We are saved by faith in Jesus alone. However, knowing what Jesus has done to save us, we live a life of faith that pleases him. We don’t go around doing sinful things against God. Instead, we show our love for Jesus by obeying his commands (Jn 14:15). In this way, we can uphold the law.

As a conclusion, let us read our key verse, Romans 3:24: “... *and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*” Before Jesus redeemed us from our slavery to sin, every one of us was condemned to eternal death. No one could be made right with God on his or her own. All of us sinned and came up short in the righteous scale of God. But the good news is that in his love and mercy, God sent his one and only Son Jesus to be a sacrifice of atonement for our sin by shedding his blood. We are justified freely by his grace. Jesus paid the price of our sins. Let us thank God from our hearts and live for the glory of God for the rest of our lives! Let us joyfully share this good news of Jesus Christ with young people who are still under the darkness of sin!