**God’s Righteousness Through Faith in Jesus**

July 25, 2021

Romans 3:21-31

Key Verse 3:22a “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

In the previous passage we learned that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. We heard about all the bad news that we are under God’s wrath due to our total depravity. At the same time we are utterly unable to do anything to save ourselves from our sins. Every mouth was silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. In the past we were like death row inmates locked in the prison who were waiting for the day of execution. There was a famous Russian writer who lived in the 19th century. He was arrested and found guilty of plotting against the government. He and a number of other convicts were brought out and lined up to be shot to death by the firing squad. But just before the first prisoner was shot, a messenger came from the king and shouted, “Stop the execution. Don’t shoot. They are not guilty.” They were acquitted of their criminal charges. Their sentence had been changed. They could live. It was good news to them. Later, this writer, Dostoevsky, wrote a famous novel entitled, “Crime and Punishment.” Likewise, the good news is declared that Jesus Christ died for our sins and we were justified by his grace, and the judge declared, “You are not guilty. You are free to go.” We cried and rejoiced by this good news and expressed our utter joy by saying, “Thank you, Jesus.” All we have to do is to believe. In fact, God not only declared that we are not guilty, but accepted us as his children. In this passage we have the answer to the question, “How can ungodly sinners be justified by a holy God?”

Look at verse 21. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” As we have studied, the Almighty God, the Righteous Judge, could have destroyed all mankind because of our sins, as he did with the people of Noah’s time. This is what the law demanded. But God did not do so. Rather, in his great mercy, God gave us a righteousness apart from the law. This refers to Jesus Christ. Instead of punishing sinners, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins according to his promises. In Jesus Christ we can have a righteousness from God. Righteousness is to have a right relationship with God. We can see this beautiful relationship in the life of Jesus. When he was about to begin his public ministry, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. It was an act of submission to God’s will. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and God spoke to him from heaven, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Thus, to be right with God is to be accepted by God, recognized by God, and loved by God. At the same time, it is to be submissive to God’s will and obedient to the life direction God has given us. When we have this kind of relationship with God, we are righteous. God looks at us and says, “You are very good. I love you. I am pleased with you.” One who is right with God has inexpressible joy. One who is right with God has absolute meaning of life. One who is right with God has absolute assurance of eternal life and the kingdom of God.

How can we obtain this righteousness? Look at verse 22. “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” The Jews and the Gentiles alike cannot obtain it by observing the law. God knew that we cannot get it by our own human efforts. Therefore, the righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is the only way we can be right with God. It is apart from the law. Some religions emphasize human behavior or activity to attain salvation. Buddha taught his followers to attain the nirvana through their self-discipline and extreme personal self-denial. He asked them to give up all human desires. Yet many Buddhist monks smoke and drink secretly. The more they try to forget the agony of life, the more they remember the sins committed before. Confucius taught his followers to adhere to a set of moral codes. One of them is “boys and girls should not sit together from the age of 7.” Who can keep this strict moral code? The Muslims must fulfill many tasks and hope for the best. They pray 5 times a day, and in the period of Ramadan, they cannot eat from sundown to sunset. Still they are not sure whether they are righteous. They teach that the only sure way to be righteous is to be a suicide bomber. If a man falls into a quicksand, what is the best hope for him to be saved? The more he tries to come out, the deeper he will fall. It is useless to struggle. He needs help from someone outside. Martin Luther tried to obtain God’s righteousness by climbing stairs with broken glasses on his knees but he was not sure of his salvation. Later, he realized that he could be right with God only by faith in Jesus.

Now Paul begins to explain how God revealed his righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. There are three key words: redemption, justification and sacrifice of atonement. Look at verse 24. “And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” The word “redemption” is used in the slave market where slaves were bought and sold. A slave could not be freed without payment. There was always a cost involved in the transfer of ownership. Redemption means payment of the price of freedom. Exodus 6:6 says, “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.” The Israelites could not free themselves from the mighty yoke of the Egyptian Empire. They needed God’s mighty acts of deliverance. What was the price of their redemption? It was the death of every firstborn son in Egypt from the firstborn son of Pharaoh to the firstborn son of the slave girl. The price of their freedom from slavery to the promised land was too high beyond our imagination. To Christians, redemption means deliverance from sin and death to life eternal. But it did not come without price. Jesus’ blood was the purchase price for our redemption. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver and 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.” Jesus gave his life to redeem us from lawlessness, a defiled conscience, guilt of sin, condemnation of sin, and eternal death. The blood of Jesus is the price that was paid for our freedom.

Look at verse 24 again. “And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Justification is a legal term taken from the courtroom. Justification is an act of God declaring a person righteous, as a judge does in acquitting the accused. God is saying to sinners because of the redemption that came by Jesus Christ, “You are not guilty!” Look at the words used in verse 24 like justified, freely, grace, and redemption. Justification is a gift of God to all of us by the grace of Jesus. It is freely given because we cannot earn it. We don’t deserve it. We can’t demand it. God offers it to us for free. All we have to do is simply to take it by faith.

The word “justification” is essentially a legal term. But the transaction that it describes is not merely legal. It is an act of God’s love. It reveals God’s heart toward sinners. In justification, God declares sinners to be his children. God recognizes sinners as the object of his love and pleasure. As amazing as it seems, to be justified is to be recognized and loved by God. When the prodigal son returned to his father, he brought only his repentance. He had sinned against heaven and against his father. He could not expect to be reinstated as a son; he only hoped to become one of his father’s servants. But his father, upon seeing him coming in the distance, ran toward his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Then the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk 15:20-24). The prodigal son was accepted by his father with the full rights and privileges of a son. The prodigal son was accepted by his father with compassion and great affection. In the same way, God accepts sinners as his own precious children by their faith in Jesus Christ while they were sinners. It is important to realize that justification takes place in the mind of God. It is not something a believer feels. We know that it took place because the Bible says so. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to have faith to believe.

Look at verses 25-26. “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. 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.” The King James version used the word “propitiation” instead of “sacrifice of atonement.” The Greek word for “propitiation” is “hilasmos” meaning “to satisfy,” “to appease,” or “to pacify.” Why do we need to satisfy or appease or pacify God? The answer is clear from Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Simply speaking, we were enemies of God. We were at war with God. We must divert God’s anger for our wickedness. In the ancient Inca Empire, there was a ritual that offered a virgin girl to appease their angry god. By offering a human sacrifice they believed that they could appease the wrath of their gods. The ancient Olympic games were held to appease Zeus. Even when Persian king Xerxes invaded Greece, they held the game because pacifying Zeus was more important than fighting the Persians. God’s reaction against sin is very serious because he is holy. All fallen mankind cannot escape the wrath of God against them. At the same time man was helpless to make peace with God. Therefore, there was a need to satisfy the just demands of God for judgment of sin. How did God find the solution? Who can appease God who demands the justification of our sin? Who can satisfy God who expresses his wrath against all our wickedness? Can you go to God and appease him in our place? No one can do that because we are guilty before him. Verse 25 in KJV says, “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.”

Most of us think about salvation from our own personal perspective: Christ died for our sins, and he rose again. But the Bible teaches that primarily salvation is not about us, it is about God. Salvation is not ultimately for us, but it is for God. In fact, everything, in the end, is for God and for the glory of God. Salvation is of Him and through Him and for Him. Your salvation is not the end; the glory of God is the end and the goal. We know Christ died for sinners; but in the end, ultimately Christ died for God. You remember that Jesus is called “the Lamb of God,” God’s Lamb. Jewish people would choose a lamb to be offered at Passover. God chose his own Son to be his Lamb. The death of Christ was for God in the sense that God was the one who had to be satisfied. He was the one who had to be propitiated. The death of Christ was for God in the sense that He was the one offended, he was the one violated, he is the one dishonored—as David says, “Against you and you only have I sinned.” All sin is primarily against God. Salvation, whatever it is, then has to satisfy God. It has to satisfy his righteousness, his justice, his mercy, and his grace. He must be satisfied. And God determined that he would find his satisfaction in the death of Jesus Christ. Justice and mercy met at the cross. The cross glorifies God because it declares his righteousness.

Look at verses 25b-26 again. “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.” God is not like Buddha. God did not just “forget about” man’s sins in making the way of righteousness for us. Rather, God punished every sin without missing one. God did so when he punished Jesus on the cross. Verse 25 contains the word “forbearance.” According to God’s just character, he had to punish sinners as their sins were committed. But God did not do so. Instead, he restrained himself and waited for the moment of Jesus’ crucifixion. Then at the cross, he punished sin to the full measure. In this way God remained the just and righteous God and also made a way to justify sinners. Praise God! Thank you Jesus!

Look at verses 27-28. “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” The cross literally eliminates any possibility of human works. There is no reason for boasting. The Jews boasted about their circumcision. But they were silenced by Paul’s charges. We should not follow the Jews in boasting. Rather, we should be humble in our service to God. The justified person should say, “I did all the sinning; Jesus did all the saving.” The law demands perfect obedience. The penalty for breaking the law must be paid. That penalty is death. The gospel tells how Christ died to pay the penalty of the broken law. Jesus paid in full. Now anyone who had broken the law can rely on the fact that Christ paid the penalty on his behalf. Thus the gospel of salvation by faith upholds the law by insisting that its utmost demands have been fully met.

May God help us remember that Christ paid in full for our sins on the cross to redeem us so that we may be justified and accepted as his holy children.

Big Idea: God’s righteousness and mercy met at the cross