

## **Romans 3:21-26**

Does the Church need the gospel?

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Romans 3:21-26 (ESV) <sup>21</sup>But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— <sup>22</sup>the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup>whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. <sup>26</sup>It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I grew up in Estes Park in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Up here in New England you all also have some mountains in the area. I hear Mount Washington in New Hampshire reaches over 6,200 feet high. That is really high—only about a thousand feet lower than my home town. Growing up in Estes Park I used to go to church every Sunday. When I was a teenager one of my favorite “church times” was youth group. One of the most interesting aspects of our youth group was the variety of kids who came. And how those kids would clump up and form groups of friends.

We had Bible trivia kids – who knew their Bibles backward and forwards. We had skateboarders – who could do kick flips in the gym – skater tricks. We had the jocks – who knew lots of sports statistics and loved playing games. We had homeschoolers – which was very popular in my home town. And we had Bible-trivia-loving homeschoolers who weren't good at sports and hurt themselves when skateboarding – that was me. Our youth group was a reflection of the rest of the church and its groups. Some of these groups were official ministries: men's groups, women's groups, couples' groups. And others were unofficial: hunters, construction workers, political enthusiasts, *Stampin-Up* stampers, hikers, movie watchers, poor people, rich people, Hispanics, Caucasians, and more.

All these different groups of people can make the church a beautiful place. But people are people and sometimes they don't get along. One group of church goers sees a ministry issues this way while a different group sees it that way. We naturally see things differently and pretty soon the unity of a church is at risk.

In the book of Romans Paul wrote to two different people groups who weren't getting along. The emperor of Rome had recently expelled the Jews from the city. So all the Jewish Christians had to leave. So while they were gone the Christian Gentiles (non-Jews) took over. But when the Jewish Christians returned to the city they came back with their beliefs. So these two sets of Christians began to fight and pretty soon the church was at risk. The Jews argued for salvation by keeping the law of Moses and the Gentiles abused God's grace. And into this situation Paul has to unify the believers as a church. And he did this not by assigning new ministries or programs. But by setting their eyes on the gospel. Paul preached that Jesus traded his righteousness for their sin so they could be united in him.

Now your pastor has been leading you through a series on the church – the acronym w.i.f.e.s. And I know as close as your pastor may come, he's not the Apostle Paul. But he does see the how the gospel must be the center of the church. Because the gospel is what unites a church to do God's work. And this is the gospel: Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we can be united in him. So what is Paul saying about us and

about God's righteousness? What is he saying about our relationship with a holy God? Let's turn to Romans 3:21-26 (read Romans 3:21-26). Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him.

So I say that Jesus traded his righteousness for our sins. But what does it mean to be righteous, what does it look like? Righteousness is about being right with a holy God (3:21).

Righteousness is about standing innocent before our perfect creator (3:21). For God righteousness comes from his nature. God is perfectly holy and just in who he is. There is not one ounce of deceit or falsehood in him. He is full of love and compassion and purity. God is perfectly pure and sinless in his essence. Righteousness comes from God's nature.

But for us righteousness comes from our judgment before God. One day we will all have to stand in the presence of a holy God. And only those who God has judged innocent will live. God will have declared all who believe in him "not guilty." So we too will be holy and pure, but not because of our natures. God's nature is naturally righteous while our nature is not. The Jewish believers in Rome knew how holy and awesome their God was. But they had to learn just how unholy and impure they were.

Righteousness didn't come by works for the church in Rome (3:21). Verse 21 says, "The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from *the law*." The Jews would have understood this term for "law" to refer to the laws of Moses. The laws of Moses include the Ten Commandments and the rest of the OT laws. These laws reflected the holy and perfect nature of God. And these Christian Jews thought if they obeyed the laws they too would be holy. Even the Gentile Christians thought maybe their good deeds could help them out. But Paul is telling them their good works simply won't do. Righteousness has become apparent *separate* from the law of Moses. This is especially difficult for the Jewish believers to understand. Because their whole lives they've been sacrificing and obeying the law. They mistakenly thought their obedience to the law could make them righteous.

But the law of Moses was even more important than they thought. God was using "the Law and the Prophets" – the entire OT – to show what was to come.

God promised righteousness would come (3:21). And this coming righteousness was going to look different than it had. As Leviticus chapter 16 says, every year the Jews celebrated "The Day of Atonement," which is called Yom Kippur. Modern Jews today just celebrated it not too long ago on the 25-26<sup>th</sup> of September. There's no sacrifices today but in the OT this day looked much different. Every year the High Priest took two goats and other animals to cleanse the people. Among the animals he sacrificed, one was a goat to represent the people's sin.

He put the goat's blood in a bowl and entered the holy of holies to make atonement. He sprinkled the blood on the top of the Ark of the Covenant on the *mercy seat*. He sprinkled blood on the *mercy seat* to make atonement for the sins of the people. And as the High Priest sprinkled blood he burned incense to block his eyesight. Because God's presence was visible above the *mercy seat*. Now remember the term "mercy seat" because we're going to come back to it.

After this the high priest laid his hands on a second goat called, "the scapegoat." He placed the sins of the people on the goat and sent it into the wilderness. If there's any animal lovers out there, it's not too late to put

your earmuffs on. Because tradition says they really didn't want to have the goat come home. And bring home their sins, so they threw the goat off a cliff—not sure if that's true. God commanded the people to do this ritual over and over again every year. It wasn't that he had it out for the animals in Israel. But that it pointed ahead to the need for an ultimate day of atonement. That one day the perfect sacrifice would be made. God promised this righteousness would someday come. And this righteousness of God arrived with Jesus.

God's righteousness came with Jesus Christ (3:22-23). We need the righteousness that belongs to Jesus (3:22b-23). Romans 3:22b-23 says, "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It doesn't matter if you're a Jew or a Gentile or in some other church group. There is no distinction because we've all missed the mark. And we deserve God's just punishment.

Look in verse 23, "All have sinned." This verb, to sin, is in the past tense. Paul is pointing toward our collective sin in Adam in the Garden of Eden. How we were all born guilty before God. Now look again at verse 23 where it says, "And fall short." This is in the present tense and means we are "continually falling short." So we're all born sinners and we continue to sin daily. "Uh-oh," we need a savior. We need someone to rescue us from our sin because we cannot get out of it.

My first semester at college was at a mid-sized community college. I took three courses that semester and one of them was humanities. I actually had my first opportunity to do public speaking in that class. I think the Lord was confirming I should become a preacher. Because I just kept talking till the teacher made me stop. So you all might want to assign that job to one of your church leaders.

In the class that semester we learned about this concept of "Deus Ex Machina." The Greek playwrights gathered every year to perform plays they had written. These playwrights would write their characters into convoluted messes. By the end their characters would get in so much trouble they couldn't fix it. Even the author couldn't craft a way for the characters themselves to work it all out. So they built machinery ("machina") and lowered their god onto the set to sort it out. This is why only a handful of plays are remembered from that time. Because the ones that ended with "Deus Ex Machina" weren't very artistic. The Greeks wanted their heroes to work out all their problems and we do too. But God knew we couldn't work out our problems. We sinned collectively in Adam and are continually sinning today. God graciously planned all along to provide us with a savior. And this is why God sent his only son Jesus Christ. Because God had plans to make righteous all who believe in Jesus.

God offers us his righteousness through faith in Jesus. (3:22) Verse 22 says God gives "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." Jesus was the only person ever born without sin and he also lived a perfect life. He lived, died, and rose again in perfect obedience to God the Father. So that all who have faith in him will receive eternal life. Faith is the instrument by which we receive salvation. But our salvation comes from the faithfulness of Jesus.

Imagine a firefighter runs into a burning building to rescue a child. The firefighter busts down the door with his axe and they get out safely. And later that week the town comes together for a beautiful awards ceremony. They invite the firefighter to come up on stage along with his axe. And the mayor brings out a lavish wreath and places it on... the axe. And everyone claps and cheers for the axe that saved the day. This is what we're

doing when we place too much emphasis on our faith saving us. Jesus Christ is the hero, not our faith, but our faith is absolutely necessary. We must have faith in Jesus Christ if we want to receive salvation.

So how does this knowledge of righteousness, sin, and faith all fit together? What does Jesus' holiness have to do with me as an individual and as a church? Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him (3:24-26).

Jesus traded his rightness with God for our wrongness with God (3:24). This is what Paul meant when he said we are "justified." Justification is about Jesus taking our sins on himself. And giving his right standing before God to us. Your pastor talked last week about this with the book covers illustration, how we swap book covers with Christ when we believe in him. And because of this when God looks at our book cover he sees the righteousness of Jesus. And Jesus has also taken our dirty and stained book cover on himself. God has placed our sins on Jesus and his holiness on us. God's righteousness now belongs to us. It's not just borrowed holiness. Jesus' righteousness is our righteousness now.

I worked in Washington DC for a while as a bank examiner. We would travel around to the different banks and rate their "holiness." Maybe you thought only borrowers have credit scores, but lenders have them as well. Their credit scores are based on the financial stability of the loans they make. We gave a loan a holiness score of 1 if it had perfect credit. And we gave a loan a un-holiness score of 14 if it had failing credit. And somehow every loan managed to fall short of our standards. No loan ever got close to a perfect 1 credit rating – it was impossible. Justification is Jesus taking my imperfect credit rating of 14. And in its place giving me his perfect credit rating of 1. God has credited you his righteousness. You are a perfect 1 in God's eyes. Your review is not good or okay it's perfect.

The trade is complete and all who believe in him are made holy. Is it really justice if we've been let off the hook for what we've done? Jesus' righteousness is freely given but it wasn't easily won (3:25). Verse 25 in the ESV says, "God put forward [Jesus] as a *propitiation* by his blood." "Propitiation" means God has received a gift to remove his wrath. God is purely holy and he utterly hates wrongdoing. You might think you're a nice man or woman and only sin a little. But God hates that sin with all of his infinite being. He judges it evil and the only just punishment is infinite death.

"Propitiation" means Jesus took this punishment on himself to satisfy God's wrath. Jesus bore the full anger of God so we wouldn't have too. He was crucified so we won't have to experience God's justice. The cross is where the justice and mercy of God meet. Jesus paid the due penalty for our sin – justice. And gave us eternal life in its place – mercy.

Now some of you don't see the word "propitiation" in your translation." Maybe your translation says "sacrifice of atonement," which is the same word in Greek. This word for "propitiation" or "sacrifice of atonement" is the same word for "mercy seat." Remember how God promised his righteousness would come at the Day of Atonement? God promised righteousness would come and it has (3:25-26). The final and lasting Day of Atonement has finally come in Jesus Christ. Jesus is our new and perfect *mercy seat* that never needs to be cleansed again. His blood was spilled before the presence of a holy God. And God judged his people holy once and for all. So that we are all finally united in Christ. We are no longer separate from him but made perfectly holy with God. Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him

So what does this mean for us as individuals? What does this have to do with us and our families? It means we no longer measure our lives by our standards but by God's (3:25-26). God has already measured us and he has measured us perfect. It's not that we shouldn't try and please him with our lives. But so often we live as if God has not justified us before him.

Maybe you're a father and are consumed by providing for your family. And part of you thinks it's what gives you worth and what God expects of you. God has already judged you worthwhile and won't measure you at the annual review. So as you provide for your family trust God has provided for your worth.

Maybe you're a mom who is consumed by raising your family. And part of you thinks, "If only I can raise good kids, God will be pleased." God does not judge you on your children's achievements but on his. He is already pleased with you and what you do in your home is an act of praise.

Maybe you're a student and feel the pressures of making a name for yourself. The whole world wants you to succeed at your studies and to get a job. Well God has already judged you a success because his son succeeded at the cross. I mean, maybe you should still get a job, but your job doesn't make you a success.

Maybe you're a teenager and feel the pressures of your peers. Where people don't think you're cool or beautiful or fun. None of those things matter in Jesus. You are perfectly united to him and your Creator says "wow!" Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him

But what does this mean for the local church body? What does this mean for this congregation and ones like it all across the States and globe? It means we no longer measure the success of our church by what it does (3:26). All churches and believers will one day have to answer for what we've done. But if we're trusting in what we've done and not God, none of it matters. When our ministries and budgets and numbers are the goal, we've lost sight. We've lost sight of the gospel and this is when the unity of the church is lost. Because we have nothing in common but our interests and ideas. If I'm counting on my ministry's success to please God, of course I'll get frustrated. I'll get upset and angry because what happens really is a big deal. I need it to go perfectly or God won't like me. This is self justification.

If you've been justifying yourself for any reason, I invite you to something more. Imagine a church that is unified with a sweet understanding of what God has done. Mole hills would stay mole hills and we would shine as a city on a hill. We would have confidence to pursue ministry freely. We wouldn't have fear of failure because Jesus already succeeded for us. And what a message we would have to share with New England and the whole world! Jesus died on the cross to save sinners just like you and me. He paid the penalty for the OT saints, for the NT saints, and now for us. So that as a church we are united in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him

Both believing Jews and Gentiles made up the church in Rome. After Paul wrote this letter to them they probably never stopped being who they were. And you know what – the kids in my youth group never stopped being who they were. The athletic kids still got picked first for games. The skaters still got yelled at for using their skateboards in the gym. And the Bible trivia kids were still the fastest ones to find Obadiah. And I bet none of you are going to stop being who you are. The church is full of different groups of people. It's full of people who may want to do ministry differently. And because of that we may not always get along.

But that's why God calls his church to something greater. He calls his church to the gospel. Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him. And as a church that means you get to come together as one. Because your focus is the gospel and what Jesus has already accomplished. Jesus traded his righteousness for our sin so we could be united in him.