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HOW CAN I BE RIGHT WITH GOD?

Romans 3:21-24

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Romans Lesson 17

How Can I Be Right With God? Romans 3:21-24

Marla and I spent the infamous Y2K, when the calendar turned to January 1, 2000, in a remote village in the Czech Republic, ministering to a group of college students. One day during a break, we were walking around the village when we met a friendly local man, who took us on a nice hike and showed us around town. We told him what we were doing there.

The next day, I was in the middle of a question and answer time with the students when someone ushered in this man. He raised his hand and asked, "What is the difference between Christianity and the other religions of the world?" I thought, "What an opportunity! I get to share the gospel with this man, plus all of these students can listen as I do it!"

I then explained that all religions, including some Christian ones, such as Roman Catholicism (the Czech Republic used to be mainly Catholic, but now is largely atheist), believe that the way a person gets right with God is through good works. Every religion is man's effort to be reconciled to God by earning His favor. But biblical Christianity is God's reconciling sinful man to Himself apart from our good works. God sent His eternal Son to pay the penalty that we deserve so that we can be right with Him through grace alone by trusting in Jesus Christ.

I don't know whether God used my words to open that man's heart to the truth or not. His English was broken enough that I was not able to follow through with him via email. But his question was a vital one that leads to what is the most important question that any person can ever ask: *How can I be right with God?* Or, more specifically: How can a *sinner* such as I be right with God, who is *absolutely righteous*?

This is the question that Paul finally answers in our text and the following verses. I say *finally* because from Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul forcefully drives home the point that all people, whether the pagan Gentiles or the religious Jews, are under sin. He spent so

long on that subject, especially hitting the religious Jews with their self-righteousness, because he knew that unless we feel the weight of our own sin and condemnation, we will not appreciate our need for the gospel. We need to understand the bad news before we will welcome the good news.

Paul had referred to the gospel in Romans 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Now, he comes back to that theme, mentioning "the righteousness of God" being "manifested," that there is "no distinction" (between Jew and Greek), and the need for everyone to come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Coming after the inescapable condemnation of 1:18-3:20, "But now" is one of the greatest contrasts in the Bible. He uses the same phrase later when he contrasts our past as slaves of sin, headed for death (6:20-21), with our present (6:22), "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life." He is fond of making this same dramatic contrast in other places, also (1 Cor. 15:20; Eph. 2:4, 13; Col. 1:22). Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out (*Romans: Atonement and Justification* [Zondervan], pp. 24-25), "No man can be a Christian without realizing his utter hopelessness." He goes on to say (p. 26) that the answer to whether you are a Christian or not hinges on your answer to this question, "Is there a 'But now' in your experience?"

In our text, Paul answers the age-old question asked several times in the Book of Job (4:17; 9:2; 25:4), "How can a person be right with God?" This is such a profound text that Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 173) calls verses 21-26, "possibly the most important single paragraph ever written." Alva McClain (*Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace* [BMH Books], p. 101) says that if he could only have six verses out of the entire Bible, it would be Romans 3:21-26. Lloyd-Jones (p. 31) says, "It is no exaggeration to say of this section that it is one of the greatest and most important sections in the whole of Scripture." These and other similar comments make me feel wholly inadequate to preach on it!

We desperately need the help of the Holy Spirit to understand and apply these crucial verses!

Paul shows here that if salvation depends on our works, we face two impossible barriers: the righteousness and glory of God. How can we who have sinned be reconciled to the righteous God of all glory? How can we who have dishonored Him enter His holy presence? The great news is:

Sinners can be right with God through faith in Jesus Christ and His gracious sacrifice to redeem us.

It is crucial to understand three main things in our text:

1. We all need to be right with God because we all have sinned and fall short of His glory.

After spending two and a half chapters hammering home this point, why does Paul bring it up again? He writes (3:22b-23), "for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." He says it again because he knows how prone we all are, especially those of us from religious backgrounds, to minimize our sin and to justify ourselves by our good deeds. But ...

- A. The main issue that we all must face is how to be right with a righteous God.

When we present the gospel, we're apt to talk about God's love and mercy. But Paul is mainly concerned here to talk about God's righteousness and our sin, or lack of righteousness. He mentions *righteousness* in verses 21, 22, 25, and 26, plus "justify" in 24 and 26, and "just" in v. 26. In Greek, all of these words come from the same word root. God's righteousness refers to His absolute holiness or separateness from all sin and all that is wrong. But in this context, Paul is especially referring to how sinners may be justified or declared righteous in God's sight (3:20).

"But now" (3:21) certainly must be applied personally as Dr. Lloyd-Jones brought out, but in the context, it refers to the contrast in salvation history between the era of the Law of Moses and the grace that comes through Jesus Christ. As we saw in our last study, God's Law is not able to justify us. Rather, it condemns us by pointing out the many ways in which we have violated God's holy standard. Since we're all guilty of breaking God's Law, we all

must face the crucial question, "How can I get right with the righteous God in view of my many sins?"

- B. Both pagans and the religious have sinned and need to be right with God.

When Paul says (3:22b) "for there is no distinction," he means, "no distinction between Jew and Gentile." The religious Jews would have agreed wholeheartedly with Paul that the Gentiles are under sin, but he has labored through chapters 2 and 3 to show that even the carefully religious Jew is guilty of not keeping God's holy Law. When Paul says, "all have sinned," he uses the Greek aorist tense. This leads some commentators to argue that he is referring to our identification with Adam in his original sin (in 5:12 he uses the same tense), which may be true. But the aorist tense may also be used to look at the fact or reality of the action itself ("constative" aorist). So Paul means, "Look around, look at yourself, and you will see that all without exception have sinned." "Fall short" is in the present tense, meaning, we are consistently sinning and falling short of (or, lacking) God's glory.

- C. The essence of sin is to fall short of God's glory.

What does this mean? John Piper (*The Pleasures of God* [Multnomah Publishers], revised and expanded edition, p. 158, note 1) explains that we were created to reflect God's glory. He says, "We reflect his glory as we cherish it and keep it ever before us and make it the treasure and the goal of our lives." Then he refers to Romans 1:23, where Paul says that sinners "exchanged the glory" of God for idols. He continues,

Thus we have traded treasures. We prefer other things in life to the delights of seeing and knowing the God of glory. This is the sense in which we "lack" the glory of God. We lack it as the treasure of our lives. We lack it as our passion and goal. We lack it as our all-satisfying vision. This is the essence of sin: preferring other things to the glory of God.

Of course, this is bad news, as we've seen. We "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But, there is a hint of good news even in Paul's stating this bad news. If God's Law condemns us all as sinners, how can we possibly get around it and get right with God?

2. Sinners can be right with God apart from the Law.

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (3:21). As we’ve seen, the Law cannot put anyone in a right relationship with God. Rather, the Law reveals God’s holy standard, which convicts and condemns us for our sin.

But this new way of gaining right standing with God is apart from the Law. He means, it is apart from keeping the Law perfectly as an attempt to be right with Him. It is a completely different approach. But then, is it in opposition to the Law? No, it is “witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (which means, the whole Old Testament). Paul adds this phrase to show his Jewish readers that he is not overthrowing the Scriptures. He reinforces this in 3:31 when he says, “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.”

He goes on to illustrate this in chapter 4 with the example of Abraham, who was justified by faith, not by his works. He backs this up with Psalm 32, where David exults in “the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works” (4:6). So we would be mistaken if we thought that the Old Testament taught that sinners get right with God by keeping the Law, whereas the New Testament overthrows that and says that we get right with God by faith. In the Old Testament, God credited His righteousness to sinners who by faith looked ahead to the promised Savior. In the New Testament, that Savior has been revealed and has given Himself as the sacrifice for sinners.

To paraphrase Paul’s flow of thought here (3:20-24), “Trying to keep God’s Law will not get anyone into right standing with Him. Rather, the Law just shows us how sinful we are. So now, apart from the Law, but in line with what both the Law and the Prophets pointed to, God declares sinners righteous when they believe in His final sacrifice for sins, Jesus Christ.” That leads to...

3. All sinners can be right with God through His free grace by trusting in Jesus Christ and the redemption in Him.

Since “all have sinned,” it would be pointless for Paul to write about a way of being right with God that did not apply to all sinners. But, ironically, it is those who do not see themselves as sin-

ners who miss God's way of righteousness. If you don't think you're sick, you won't go to the doctor or take the medicine. We have to accept the diagnosis that we're sinners before we will welcome the cure of God's free grace in Christ.

To understand this good news is both simple and yet profound. It's easy enough for a child to grasp and yet deep enough to evoke thousands of pages of deep theology. In these and the following verses Paul uses some important theological words. In verses 21-24, we need to understand four terms: justification; free grace; redemption; and, faith.

A. To be justified means that God declares us to be righteous.

To justify does *not* mean to *make* someone righteous, but to *declare* him to be righteous. It is a forensic or legal term that means to obtain the verdict of acquittal. Charles Hodge defined it (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 102), "Justification is pronouncing one to be just, and treating him accordingly, on the ground that the demands of the law have been satisfied concerning him." For example, Deuteronomy 25:1 talks about judges deciding a case where "they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked." They pronounced the verdict, "not guilty," on the righteous and "guilty" on the wicked. They did *not make* the accused righteous or wicked. Rather, they pronounced them to be such.

In Romans 3:24, the verb is passive. It is something that God does to us, not something that we do for ourselves. It is not a process, but a judicial action. The process of becoming righteous in character and behavior *follows* the judicial act of God declaring us to be righteous.

B. God justifies sinners freely by His grace.

Note (3:24), "being justified as a gift by His grace" The single Greek word translated "as a gift" means, "freely." Jesus used it to say (John 15:25), "They hated Me *without a cause*." Read that sense into Romans 3:24, "being justified *without a cause*." Paul uses the word to say that he did not eat anyone's food "*without paying for it*" (2 Thess. 3:8). Again, we can say that we are justified "*without paying for it*." It is used in Revelation 22:17, where the thirsty soul is encouraged to "take the water of life *without cost*." We are justified "*without cost*." It's completely free!

As if that word alone were not enough to convey this astounding news, Paul adds one of his favorite words (which should be your favorite word, also!), "by His *grace*." Grace is God's favor shown to those who deserved His wrath. It is completely unmerited. You can see this by looking at Romans 4:4, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due." The word translated "favor" is the Greek word, "grace." When you work, you don't get grace; you get wages. Your boss owes it to you and he must pay you or you can file legal charges against him. But grace is the opposite of working and receiving what you're owed. With grace, you get undeserved favor. You deserved to get fired because you messed up, but your boss gave you a huge bonus instead. That's grace. God justifies sinners who deserve His wrath freely by His grace. The bonus is eternal life!

That's terrific news if you are the guilty sinner who is declared innocent freely because of grace. But, frankly, it doesn't seem right! If an earthly judge declares a guilty murderer "not guilty" and in addition awards him a healthy judgment and then says, "I wanted to give him what he did not deserve," we would say, "That's unjust!" So how can God be just when He declares guilty sinners to be justified when they don't deserve it?

- C. God justifies sinners through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

"Redemption" means to buy something back by the payment of a price, or to release someone by the payment of a ransom (see Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* [Eerdmans], for an in depth study of redemption, justification, and other biblical terms for salvation). In Paul's day it referred to freeing prisoners of war and slaves by paying the required price (Morris, pp. 12-13). Jesus used the word "ransom" (which is the root for the word "redemption") in Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Through His death, Jesus paid the price or penalty that God righteously imposed for our sins. Thus God's justice was satisfied. Jesus was our substitute, paying what we should have paid, so that we go free at His great expense. Thus, justification is completely free for us, but it was costly to Jesus who redeemed us with His own blood.

In the Old Testament, the chief picture of redemption was Israel's being freed from slavery in Egypt. To avoid the deaths of their firstborn sons, the Jews had to kill a lamb and place its blood on the doorposts and lintel of their houses. God saw the blood and passed over those homes. Jesus is our Passover lamb, slain to redeem us from our slavery to sin. He paid the price that God required. In that way, God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26). That leads to the last word, "faith" (or "believe"). This word is the key to the question, "How can I be right with God?"

D. God justifies sinners through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul says (3:22a), "even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." (The KJV adds the phrase "and on all"; but most commentators agree that it is not original.) Scholars debate whether the Greek phrase, which is literally, "through faith *of* Jesus Christ," refers to Jesus' faithfulness or to our faith in Him (the Greek grammar can be taken either way). I agree with those who argue that it means "faith *in* Jesus Christ" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 224-225; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 181-186). He is the object of our faith. It is not enough to have a general faith in God. You must specifically put your trust in Jesus Christ and what He did for you on the cross.

But then is Paul being redundant when he adds, "for all those who believe"? Paul knows that our fallen human tendency to want to be justified by our own supposed righteousness is so strong that he repeats it to make sure we don't miss it. The righteousness of God comes *through* faith in Jesus Christ and it is *for* all who believe. The first phrase, "through faith," shows that faith is not something that merits salvation, but rather it is the hand that receives the gift. The last phrase, "for all those who believe," underscores the universal offer of God's grace. No sinner needs to despair that he is too far gone. All who believe are justified by God's free grace.

Conclusion

So how can you and I as sinners be right with a God who is absolutely holy? It's impossible to be right with God by striving to be a good person or by attempting to keep God's Law. As we saw

last week, the Law only reveals how far we fall short of God's glory. To be right with God by our good deeds would be like lining up at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and trying to jump across to the North Rim. An Olympic broad jumper might get 25-30 feet from the edge before he went down. I'd get maybe 8-10 feet before I would go down. A person with infirmities would only step off the edge and plummet to his death. But no one could leap the ten miles to the other side. It's impossible!

On judgment day, the question will not be, how far did you jump before you went down? The only question will be, did you get to the other side? You either will be lost by trying to get to heaven by your good deeds, or justified by trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf. The great news is that although we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory, freely by His grace He declares righteous all who put their faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice to redeem us. To be right with God, make sure that your trust is totally in Jesus Christ! If you have put your trust in Christ alone to carry you across the chasm between you and God, you know that there is a huge "but now" in your life!

Application Questions

1. Why are we all so prone to try to get right with God by our own good works? What sin is at the root of this?
2. The Roman Catholic view is, "Faith + Works = Justification." The Protestant view is, "Faith = Justification + Works." Why is this distinction crucial? How would you defend it biblically?
3. What practical blessings result from the biblical view that justification is God's judicial action, not a lifelong process?
4. Someone argues, "It's not just for God to declare the guilty as innocent with no promise or effort to change on their part." How would you answer him from Scripture?

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