

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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9/14/25

Sermon Title: “Righteousness for the Unrighteous”

Sermon Text: Romans 3:21-26

Rom. 3:21 ¶ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—

Rom. 3:22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

Rom. 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Rom. 3:24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Rom. 3:25 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.

Rom. 3:26 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.

Main Point: God upholds his own righteousness even while saving sinners, not by simply winking at sin, but through Christ’s work of propitiation, which takes away all of mankind’s grounds for pride or boasting.

Outline:

1. How Righteousness is Applied (justification) (3:24)
2. How Righteousness is Appropriated (faith) (3:25a)
3. How Righteousness is Achieved (propitiation) (3:25b)

Introduction

Leon Morris, the New Testament scholar, said that this passage today is “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”

I think Leon Morris may have exaggerated things a bit, but not too much. This section of Romans, seems to me, to be the very center and hinge of the entire letter. Nothing that comes before makes any sense without it, and nothing after can be understood if it isn't here. It is this that Paul has been leading to, and the rest of the letter is impossible without it. All of the things we've been looking at so far converge in this incredible passage today.

And this text answers three absolutely important questions that Paul has been leading to, and that he will use to underly *everything* that he says from here on out. So our three points are the three questions Paul answers. First, how righteousness is applied. Second, how righteousness is appropriated. The third, how righteousness is achieved.

Paul knows that he is talking to people who are unrighteous in one sense: they've sinned and done wrong. But he also wants them to know how and why actually in Christ they really *are* righteous or how they *can* be. And I want us to grasp and rejoice in the same thing here today.

1. How Righteousness is Applied (justification) (3:24)

First, Paul shows us how righteousness is applied.

What Paul says here beginning in verse 23 is incredibly potent. Remember what we mean by righteousness. Righteousness is the “rightness” of God. It's his purity. It's more than just his sinlessness, but it's his *goodness*. To lack sin is one thing, but to be righteous is to be positively good. And God is goodness itself. He is the definition of goodness.

And that's the righteousness Paul is talking about here, too. In verse 25, as we saw last week, forgiveness creates this dilemma: how can God pass over former sins

while also upholding his righteousness? How can he forgive sins while also not being the sort of bad judge who winks at wrongdoing?

Now, last week, we pointed to the cross as the work upon which God can let sinners like you and I go free and be treated like good and righteous people, even when we have an actual history of sin. The cross is where the is accomplished and answered.

But here is the question: how do we *receive* this righteousness? What is the way that God looks at an unrighteous person (like you or me) and says, “Now you are righteousness”? The answer of Paul here in verse 24 is this: sinners are “justified by his grace as a gift.” So it is justification which is the gift we get from God (and we’ll talk about how we get that gift in the next point) where God declares guilty people to now be “not guilty.”

This is why in verse 25 he speaks of justification as something God has already done previously for others in the past, and he speaks of it as God “passing over former sins.” When God justifies a sinner, he passes over their sins, he does not regard our sins. That word for regard is the word “impute.” He doesn’t impute our sins to us.

And look: we belabored the sinfulness of fallen mankind so thoroughly that you may have started to feel like it was getting a little heavy handed. You can only talk about the sinfulness of mankind for so long before you start to say, “Man, we really are miserable.” That can get wearying to reflect on after a while. But God’s answer is not to say, “You’re not so bad. You’re better than you think. It’s fine. Look at the silver lining...” God doesn’t do any of that. Instead, he takes our sin seriously, never minimizes it, never tries to make us feel better with some kind of argument or positive thinking.

And so we get to the place where we say, “I need to know... how do we get rescued from this? How do we escape or get this problem of sin dealt with?” Well God’s answer is justification. He no longer looks at us as guilty, but as good... no longer as wicked, but as righteous: as righteous as he is.

That is a gift, Paul says. We are justified by his grace as a gift.

But there you see something else that's precious: the gift is *gracious*. It's undeserved. It's not a declaration that we are righteous that is based in us. If it was just saying what you were like or what you did then it wouldn't be gracious, it would just be what we deserve – which is not at *all* the same as gracious. Grace is when we get a good thing that we *haven't* deserved.

Also notice that justification isn't something we do. It's not a human accomplishment or a process or something that we act to make happen. It's something God does. That's Paul's point, because in verse 26 Paul says it is God who is the justifier. God justifies. We *receive* his justification. He does this for us. He names us as righteous. He's the one that does it.

And if you have a strong sense of your own sinfulness, this should come as the sweetest, greatest, most wonderful news you have ever heard: that even when he knows what you've done... he's known your heart... he's known your thoughts... the most wonderful news is to hear that our God would name you as righteous in Christ.

Here is my question for you: *have* you actually been justified? Has God looked at you in your sin and in your misery and said, "Not guilty. Righteous. Righteous as a gift of my grace." Have you experienced this?

Here's a more fundamental question that Paul's going to answer: how is it that God will justifies us? And especially if you cannot say that you have been justified by God's grace, you need to know what comes next.

2. How Righteousness is Appropriated (faith) (3:25a)

Because second, Paul shows us how righteousness is appropriated. To put it another way, he is showing us the means or tool by which the righteousness of Christ is applied to us.

This is very important: we highlight faith frequently here. Faith is very important, but it is not itself the *cause* of our salvation. If it was, then we would be causing our own salvation when we exercise faith. Instead, the Reformers said that faith was the instrument by which we take hold of Christ, and in having *Christ* we have his blessings of salvation. We take hold of the person of Christ, not salvation. We

take hold of Jesus, not salvation. Salvation comes by Christ, whom we have by faith.

For example, Peter Martyr Vermigli said this in his Romans commentary: “Faith is the instrument by which we receive the righteousness of Christ; it is not the cause that produces it, nor is it meritorious.”

Luther, in his famous commentary on Galatians said this: “We say that faith justifies, not because it is such a good work, but because it takes hold of Christ. Just as the hand takes hold of a gift, so faith takes hold of Christ. It is not the hand that gives the value, but the gift that is put in it.”

Paul clearly speaks of faith as the means by which we receive the blessings of Christ when he says this in verse 25: “[Christ] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

Now, we will talk about this concept of propitiation in the next point. But propitiation refers to the removal of God’s wrath. For the moment, notice the means by which God intends for us to receive this blessing: and that means is faith.

You hear me talk in this church about faith a lot. I know. I try to talk about the importance of faith in Christ in every sermon. I certainly talk about it each time I administer the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a meal that is meant to be received by faith. And the reason it has to be received by faith is that Christ can only be received by faith. In the supper we receive Christ. And we receive him in no other way than by faith. That is true whether you are listening to a sermon or receiving the supper. We receive the same Christ in the supper that we receive in the sermon, but we receive him in a different way. With a sermon we receive Christ with the ears and heart. With the Lord’s Supper we receive him with the mouth and heart. But neither of those ever come apart from faith.

One more important thing: according to Paul you are not justified until you place your faith in Jesus. Jesus laid his life down in the past tense. Jesus did what was necessary for you in the past at the cross. But you yourself are not and were not justified until you actually believe in Christ for yourself.

It is only once we obtain Christ for ourselves that we receive his benefits. And so the obvious application here is, believe in the Lord Jesus. Come to him. Take hold of him by faith. Trust in him. Don't rest in yourself or trust in yourself.

That's the application.

3. How Righteousness is Achieved (propitiation) (3:25b)

Third today Paul tells us how righteousness is achieved.

Our justification must take place on the basis of some action that is outside of us, that we could not do or accomplish for ourselves. And that thing which is outside of ourselves is what Paul calls "propitiation." In particular, in the second half of verse 25, Paul speaks of Christ "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood."

So the blood becomes the means of propitiation. The blood becomes the way that God's wrath is removed.

And this whole idea isn't novel or new to the New Testament period. God's people had been spilling blood for centuries before the sacrifice of God the Son ever took place.

In the Bible, the system of offerings and sacrifices had an immediate purpose. The purpose was to effect a change in relationship between God and the worshiper. In Exodus 12:13, for example, God tells Moses, "when I see the blood, I will pass over you." Think about this: before, they would not have been passed over. They would have received death. But then because of the blood, he does not give them what they were supposed to receive. So the sacrifice was presented, slaughtered, its blood sprinkled, and then something happened. But this is very important: this thing that happened did not change anything in the worshiper, it (in a sense) moved God to forgive their sins because the life of the lamb was taken instead of the worshiper whose life would have been forfeit.

I want you to notice when I talk about this. Notice whom the atonement is made to. It is not man but God.

And when it comes to the New Testament we see this very clearly, for example, in Hebrews 9:14, which says that Christ “offered himself unblemished to God.” You see the death of Jesus was an offering to God. Not an offering to man or to Satan, but to the holy God who is the one who is offended and wrathful toward our sin. We also see this sacrifice to God in Ephesians 5:2 where he says that Christ loved us and give himself up for us “as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” It is God who receives the fragrance of Christ’s sacrifice. Christ laid down his life, which averted or removed the anger of God against sinners.

Tom Schreiner points out that in his death “Jesus functioned as the priest, victim, and the place where the blood is sprinkled.” The removal of God’s wrath is accomplished through the blood of his Son.

The word for this removal of God’s anger or wrath is “Propitiation.” To propitiate is to remove someone’s wrath. Let me see if this human example of propitiation is helpful for you:

Imagine a child who accidentally breaks a neighbor’s window while playing baseball. The neighbor is understandably upset. The child, realizing the seriousness of the situation, goes over with his parents to apologize. Not only does he apologize sincerely, but his parents also offer to pay for the window to be replaced immediately.

The neighbor, seeing the remorse and the willingness to make things right, lets go of his anger. His sense of justice is satisfied because restitution was made and the offense was taken seriously.

This is what makes propitiation different from mere appeasement or placation: propitiation is not just about calming someone down, but actually addressing the cause of someone’s righteous anger in a way that fully satisfies justice and removes any obstacle between us. That’s why in theology, propitiation is such a powerful word — it tells us that God’s wrath is not ignored or sidestepped, but that it is dealt with in full.

Paul is telling us that Christ’s death isn’t about merely *appeasing* God... That would ignore the righteous reason God has for being wrathful towards sin. Christ’s death is about *removing* the very thing that was at the root of his righteous anger against

you and against me, so that in Christ God *never* has a reason to be angry with you or me ever again for all of eternity.

But in today's passage Paul here calls Jesus a "propitiation," and says that although Christ was put forward as the propitiation, it was his blood that was the means of this propitiation of God's anger and wrath. Why? Because our own life was the righteous price of our disobedience. And Leviticus tells us that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

And this is what makes the love of Christ so powerful. In Jesus Christ, mankind atones for his own sin. It was *our* sin, and so we must atone for it. And so Christ (who is God) became a man and became the pure and perfect man who would lay his life down for sinners.

Now, there's one more thing we need to do which brings these things together. Paul says that this propitiation was needed... the sacrifice of Christ was needed, why? "[B]ecause in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."

So this is important. The sacrifices we find in Leviticus... the ceremonies that were practiced, were not themselves the propitiation that was needed. Those sacrifices did not remove the wrath of God. Instead, Paul is showing us what really happened:

in the moment, people received forgiveness, even in the Old Testament. God passed over their sins and they did not die. But the sacrifices they made were not the reason that their sin was passed over. The author of Hebrews explains why in Hebrews 10:4: "But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:3-4).

So the sacrifices never propitiated God's wrath at all, they functioned as signs pointing and foreshadowing the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The OT sacrifices only reminded the people of their sin and of the fact that a true sacrifice was still on the way. In other words, there was a prospective (looking forward) aspect to those sacrifice. When they killed the bull or the goat or the animal for sacrifice, it was a forward-looking forgiveness. As if God was saying, "I

forgive you, not for the sake of this animal, but for the sake of the real sacrifice that you so are looking forward to.”

Here is how Tom Schreiner summarizes this:

“The OT sacrifices cannot bring forgiveness; Paul implies that they simply foreshadowed the forgiveness effected through Jesus, since God patiently bore with sins committed during the Mosaic era. God looked ahead to the death of Jesus as the true sacrifice for sins. Those who revert to the law for righteousness will be disappointed because the atonement provided in the law does not really forgive. Only Jesus’s death satisfies God’s wrath. The saving righteousness of God, therefore, cannot be obtained through the law.”

And perhaps now you can see why Leon Morris said what he said that this passage is “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”

Because in it Paul is telling us

- (1) what God has done to rescue people from their sins...
- (2) how God saved people from their sins before Christ came...
- (3) how God saves people from their sins today...
- (4) what Jesus did for his people as the fundamental basis for their forgiveness...
- (5) the futility of turning to the law to find that forgiveness and peace with God...
- (6) how we can ourselves have peace with God (faith alone).

Conclusion

As I conclude here, I want to bring these things together by making an evangelistic appeal to you. Whether you are already a Christian, or whether you are considering becoming a Christian, you need God to provide the answer to the peace that you need.

I can promise you that you are a sinner. Your conscience testifies to it. The people around you can testify to it.

We do resist this. Modern people fight to keep conscience at bay by minimizing the gravity of sin, dismissing the thought of life after death or re-imaging God as an all-indulgent deity.

Yet, as Calvin reminds us, “[People] from time to time do feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe.” He keeps going, saying that there was no one who ever burst forth into more rebellious contempt of God than the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula, “yet no one trembled more miserably when any sign of God’s wrath manifested itself.”

In this, Calvin points out that nothing has really changed between then and now: “he who is the boldest despiser of God is of all men the most startled at the rustle of a falling leaf. Whence does this arise but from the vengeance of divine majesty, which strikes their consciences all the more violently the more they try to flee from it?”

I would like to convince you that what you need is not simply to have peace of mind, but to have a strong, deep, solid *reason* for that peace of mind. Let me tell you what Scripture says: the death of Jesus is a propitiation for sin. There is no more solid basis for the peace that you need than Jesus Christ and what he has done.

The answer is not to minimize or seek psychological relief. Instead, God wants you to take your sin seriously, and not dismissively, because he takes your sin seriously.

If you are a sinner, then God has reason to be angry with your sin. My question to you today is, have you turned to Christ, in whom mankind’s sin has been dealt with? Here’s the question: Either God has a reason to be angry with you for your sin, or else you have fled to Jesus Christ and found peace with God through his blood. Which one is it for you?

Paul’s good news for us is that the saving righteousness of God is obtained only through faith in Jesus Christ, not through the works of the law. That is the best news possible.

Let’s pray.