



Romans 3:20-26
Justification by Faith Alone

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

21 But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

22 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,

26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I know some of you are probably thinking at this point “where is our sermon on Jeremiah? Don’t you normally preach on Romans in the evening. Or maybe, wow did I really oversleep or what?” Well fear not, this wasn’t a mistake, I flipped the order of the sermons on purpose. We’ve reached a point in Romans that is of such monumental importance to the Christian faith, that I couldn’t bear the idea of around 40% of the church missing it. Namely the beginning of Paul’s discussion of Justification by Faith Alone. Now Justification, sadly is a word that Christians have begun to be unfamiliar with but it’s a critically important word because it’s the word for the way in which we are declared to be **right with God** or **Saved**. Or to be more technical to quote the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q33: What is justification?

A33: Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.

That’s pretty important right? Not a word we should forget? In fact it’s so important that Calvin said of Justification ***“This is the main hinge on which religion turns... For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.”***

Because of that, Luther described the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone as the article upon which the church stands or falls, and if it does not get this doctrine right, it ceases to be an authentic church.

While Justification by Faith Alone was a key concept in Romans, and indeed throughout the Word of God, it is something that the church during the middle ages lost its grasp on, and instead began teaching that men were Justified not by Faith, but by Faith and works, or worse sometimes just by works. Now Paul has shown us prior to these verses, that all men both Jews and Gentiles are sinners, and that all stand condemned and guilty before God and that there is no way to be saved by works.

If any man could have kept the law, there would be the possibility of his being saved by His law keeping. But only one man in all the history of the world had any ability to save himself by keeping the law of God, that is by obeying God's commandments perfectly, and that was Adam in the Garden. Adam failed miserably, and since that time all of His children, except Jesus Christ, have followed in his footsteps. As we saw last week, all mortal men inherited Adam's sin nature. We see the proof of that in that all mortal men from their infancy sin, and as a consequence, all men die. So Paul starts by saying "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" but does that mean the law is useless to us? Far from it, Paul will discuss some of the good uses of the law, the most important of which is this "by the law is the knowledge of sin." In other words, we see God's commandments, we see have broken them and therefore we have sinned, and that knowledge that we are sinners, sends us running to the Gospel for salvation. It is this use of the law, the pedagogical use, that Paul is bringing to bear here.

He has shown us, we are all sinners, thieves, liars, murderers, and that none of us can keep the commandments of God, he's piled the law on thick, he's devastated, destroyed our self-righteousness and hopes of saving ourselves by "Living a good life" but in verse 21 everything changes, this is the critical "But now" which is the transition point for the whole letter.

You can't be saved by trying to be good, if you've realized that, if you know you are a sinner, good! Here then, says Paul in verses 21 and 22, is the way to be saved, ***through faith in Jesus Christ***. No one can be saved by works but all men can be saved by receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation. That is the good news of the Gospel! Paul says also this Gospel is not a NEW teaching, it was revealed in the Old Testament. It wasn't that there were these super saints back in Old Testament who, unlike you, were actually able to keep the law but now you have to be saved by the Gospel. Not at all, in fact I'm thankful that the Old Testament shows us just what kind of terrible sinners even great men of God were. In fact lest you think their good works were somehow better, read what it says in Isaiah 64:6-7

Is. 64:6 But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; (note that not our sins – but our righteousnesses!) We all fade as a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, Have taken us away.

7 And there is no one who calls on Your name, Who stirs himself up to take hold of You; For You have hidden Your face from us, And have consumed us because of our iniquities.

How were they saved? By believing in the Lord's Gospel promise to send a redeemer, the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent, Immanuel, God with Us, that is Jesus Christ:

Job believed that promise and said of Him in Job 19:25: ***For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth;***

26 And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God,

27 Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! So too did Abraham and we are told in Gen. 15:6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Now keep in mind, none of these Old Testament Saints who were saved through faith alone, were made perfectly righteous in their lifetime. For instance 5 chapters after we read in Genesis that “he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” We see him lying to the men of Gerar about Sarah his wife telling them that she was his sister.

But their sins, past present and future were paid for. Jesus took those sins from His elect and placed them upon himself, and he paid the awful price for them on the Cross. The Old Testament saints were given a beautiful foreshadowing of that in **Yom Kippur** – The Day of Atonement we find in Lev. 16– Two Goats were involved, one was sacrificed as sin offering for the sins of God’s people and his blood was sprinkled upon the mercy seat, the other however was the scapegoat, the High Priest laid both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confessed over it all the sins of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, and put them on the head of the goat, and then it was sent away into the wilderness never to return.

In this we see two things symbolized, first the payment for sin by the death of the sacrifice, and then the removal of those sins as they were placed on the head of the scapegoat who took them away. Jesus did both of these things at the cross and as a result as *Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

We hear of governors and presidents pardoning law breakers all the time. But this is not an act of pardon, God is not pardoning the guilty sinner. Oh no, our sins have to be paid for, either through an eternity spent in Hell or the sacrifice of Christ.

The Cross is not merely a symbol, it is the heart of the gospel. Because it was there that Christ’s propitiation occurred. Today the words propitiation and expiation have been removed from most Bible translations, but that is a terrible shame, because they are both of critical importance. What we need is not to remove these words from these words from our translations, but to teach people what they mean. Propitious means favorably inclined, propitiation is what Christ had to do to make God favorably inclined to us, so that we might pass from being guilty and deserving of punishment to being beloved Son and Daughters of God. What had to happen was for Christ to die in our place.

Expiation is to have our sins removed, taken away from us. Easton’s Bible dictionary defines it this way: *Guilt is said to be expiated when it is visited with punishment falling on a substitute. Expiation is made for our sins when they are punished not in ourselves but in another who consents to stand in our room. It is that by which reconciliation is effected. Sin is thus said to be "covered" by vicarious satisfaction. The cover or lid of the ark is termed in the LXX. hilasterion, that which covered or shut out the claims and demands of the law against the sins of God's people, whereby he became "propitious" to them. The idea of vicarious expiation runs through the whole Old Testament system of sacrifices.*

The Cross makes God both Just and Justifier, because it is there and there alone that the sins of the elect are paid for in full and the ability to be adopt these fallen sons and daughters of Adam and make them His own granted!

But Jesus also did something else for us of critical importance, He not only took away our sins, he established us as righteous in the eyes of God by imputing to us, that is crediting us with his own righteousness. This is something called Dual imputation. In it Christ took our filthy rags, that is our sins, off of us and then he took his spotless righteousness and he gave it to us, so that when we who are saved by Faith Alone in Christ, stand before God on the last day, He will see not our sins, but the perfect righteousness of Christ:

Zechariah 3:1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.

2 And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?"

3 Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel.

4 Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes."

5 And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head." So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by.

2 Cor. 5:21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jesus won all of these things for us at the cross, but this Justification is something that happens to us in a moment of time when we come to faith in Him, it is then and only that the benefits of His atonement are applied. But at that moment we are acquitted, Justification is the legal declaration that you are not guilty before God on account of the Righteousness of Christ imputed to you and received by Faith Alone.

[Savonarola attempted to bring salvation to Florence, but he failed, he managed to do what the preceding chapters of this epistle have done, to convict all men of sin, however once this was done, he set men on the path of trying to establish their own righteousness by keeping the law of God. "You've done badly in the past, do better now" So the were put on the treadmill of works righteousness, of do instead of done. It failed, because their new attempts to justify themselves were just as hopeless as the old ones. George Whitefield described any attempt to save yourself by your own works as like trying to climb to the moon on a rope of sand, and the majority quickly got tired of it, so the Reformation of Florence fizzled out.]

You see in order to be saved, we must receive this justification not as reward for the works that we have done, but as the free gift of God's grace.

These things are freely given and it is all by God's grace, you did not earn them, even the faith that united you to Christ is his gift. And remember your faith doesn't save you, your faith united you to Christ, Christ saved YOU.

Which brings me to my first Application and it is of Critical importance to Christians:

1) Assurance: If you have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, all of your sins past present and future have been paid for, there is nothing you can add, and these sins cannot be put back on your shoulders, you cannot lose your salvation because Christ cannot "unpay" for your sins. The evil one will whisper

in your ear, “you’re not worthy” he will try to get you to look to your failures, but at that point answer him NO I AM NOT WORTHY, BUT CHRIST IS, AND I AM RESTING UPON HIM ALONE FOR SALVATION!

2) To those of you who have NOT YET BELIEVED or who may be trusting in something else - Now to All have sinned, all fall short of the glory of God, therefore there is only ONE way of salvation for all men – Faith in Jesus Christ. It is His sacrifice alone that could do what is necessary for you to be saved, and ONLY faith in Him will unite you to Him. No religion, no work can do this.