

Good Friday 2022

The Righteousness Of God

April 15th, 2022

Romans 3:21-26

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Introduction:

Good morning Redeemer. Please turn there with me in your Bibles to Romans 3:21-26.

There's a well-known expression that claims, "Knowledge is power." But that's not entirely true, is it? You can know a great deal about things that matter very little. You could possess all the knowledge in the world about Canadian men's curling, for example, but is *that* power?

Knowledge, in and of itself, is not powerful at all. What matters is the *object* of your knowledge.

I want to tell you this morning that knowledge of the CROSS is POWER! Not only is it power, but it is freedom! It is comfort! It is joy! It is peace! When you understand THIS, everything changes!

I would argue that the clearest, most comprehensive explanation of the cross is found here in Romans 3:21-26. If you can only give your attention to one paragraph this year, then I would suggest to you that THIS paragraph deserves your attention above all the rest. Commentator Leon Morris argues that this is "possibly the most important single paragraph ever written"¹. He is not alone. Martin Luther claimed that this section was "the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible."²

On this most sacred day, we are considering a most sacred text. Here, the Apostle Paul explains and exposes what it is that Christ accomplished for us at the cross. Look with me now to Romans 3:21-26. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 173.

² Martin Luther as quoted by Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 125.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,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.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. (Romans 3:21-26 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This morning, we are looking again to the cross of Jesus Christ. But what is it that we are supposed to see? In what is likely the most important paragraph ever written, the Apostle Paul gives us an answer to the question:

What Should I See As I Look At Christ On The Cross?

First, Paul tells me that I should see:

1. My sin

He begins this passage with the words “But now”, which suggests that we won’t properly understand what he is going to say next unless we understand what he said previously. And what he said previously is that God’s Law – the Mosaic Law – has exposed the fact that we are ALL sinners.

Now, there were some who misunderstood the Law. They saw it as some sort of merit system. They boasted in it, because they thought that the Law was a tool that they could use to display their own righteousness. But Paul explains in these opening chapters that they have it exactly backwards! The Law isn’t a tool to display our righteousness! It is a tool to reveal *God’s* righteousness and to display how far we all fall short! That’s the argument that Paul has been making, and he picks it back up at the end of verse 22:

For there is no distinction:²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22b-23 ESV)

Do you know that this morning? It's important that you do.

You are a sinner. So am I. So is the person sitting next to you. There is not a single person sitting here this morning who could stand before our holy God apart from Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Is it possible that you've forgotten how desperately you need a Saviour? Perhaps you saw your dependence in your early days, but now you've grown in holiness. Now, you have fruitful morning devotions, and you memorize Scripture, and you even share the gospel with your neighbours, and suddenly God's grace towards you doesn't take your breath away like it used to. Whereas you used to wonder how it is that God could love a sinner like *you*, now you find yourself looking around at the rest of the Christians in your circle and you wonder how it is that God could love sinners like *them*.

You can only think that way if you've stopped looking at the cross.

If you look at the world, and you look at your peers, and then you look in the mirror, maybe just maybe you could find a reason to boast. But when you look to the cross, and you behold the perfect Son of God hanging there in your place as your substitute, the heart of the Christian cries out:

Behold the man upon the cross
My sin upon his shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was MY sin that held him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that "it is finished"³

That's the first thing I need to see as I look to Christ on the cross. Second, the Apostle teaches me that I should see:

2. God's righteousness

³ Stuart Townend, *How Deep The Father's Love For Us*.

The Greek root for “righteousness⁴” shows up seven times in this passage. This idea – this way of understanding the cross – is clearly important to Paul. If you want to understand the cross, then you need to understand something of how it reveals the righteousness of God. In the past, the Law and the prophets provided us with a glimpse of God’s justice and righteousness, but now, Paul says:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God **through faith in Jesus Christ** for all who believe. (Romans 3:21-22 ESV)

When we look to Christ in faith, one of the things that we should see – one of the things that we **MUST** see – is the righteousness of God! In fact, if we’re not seeing that – if we’re not seeing His justice, and His goodness and His righteousness on full display – then we’re not yet seeing all of what we are *supposed* to see in our crucified King. Paul points to the cross and explains:

This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 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. (Romans 3:25b-26 ESV)

This is an aspect of the cross that we are inclined to miss – or at least to downplay. I tend to over-emphasize what happened FOR ME on the cross. I remember singing a song in church as a kid, and it included the line:

Like a rose trampled on the ground, he took the fall, and thought of me above all⁵.

Is that true? Now, don’t overhear me. I believe that Jesus DID think about his people on the cross. In fact, Paul goes on to say in chapter 5:

but **God shows his love for us** in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

So he DID think of me on the cross. Hallelujah! But did he think of me *above all*?

⁴ In Greek, this is the dikaios word grouping.

⁵ Paul Baloche & Lenny LeBlanc, *Above All*, 1995.

Let me frame it differently: Why did Jesus go to the cross? Was it *only* a display of God's love for me? Or was it something more? Paul points to the cross and declares:

This was to show God's righteousness (Romans 3:25b ESV)

The cross DOES say that you are loved. And it DOES say that you are forgiven. And it DOES say that you are a child of God. Yes, yes, and YES! Hallelujah!

YES! But the cross is *also* and *equally* declaring something about HIM! The cross declares that our God is righteous! It declares that He is a good God who will not – who cannot – turn a blind eye to sin and injustice.

Prior to the cross, skeptics and mockers could have charged God with injustice. God had forgiven Noah for drunkenness. God had forgiven Judah for sleeping with a prostitute. God had forgiven David for adultery and murder. Time and time and time again, God had extended mercy to a people who had committed terrible injustices. And an onlooker could have charged, “What kind of a God is this?! You say He is holy? You say He is righteous? Tell that to Bathsheba! Tell that to Uriah! Your God is the God who simply overlooks sin! He may be loving, but He is not righteous.”

He DID pass over former sins, but there was always a plan in place to deal with them. At the cross, God wrote with all capital letters that HE IS RIGHTEOUS! He is JUST and He is the JUSTIFIER.

There is not a single sin that He has missed. From Adam's sin in the garden, to David's sin with Bathsheba, to Peter's sin at Jesus' trial, to the sin that was done to you in your childhood, to the sin that you will commit next week – EVERY SIN has been accounted for by God. EVERY SIN will receive the exact penalty that it deserves. Either we will eternally pay the wages for that sin in our bodies, or we will lay our sin in faith on Jesus – our eternal King – and he will pay for it in his body on the cross.

Either way, our righteous God will prove that He is both just, and the justifier. I love the way that Tim Keller summarizes this. He writes:

He is a Father worth having, and he is a Father we can have.⁶

It's necessary that we see this, because if this were not true, then God would not be worthy of our praise. Let me ask you a question: If the gospel simply said, "Put your trust in Jesus and God will forgive and forget all of your sins", would that be good news? Would it be good news if the God of the universe – the God whose authority we are going to live under for all eternity – were a God who could wink at sin and forget about it?

Is that gospel good news for the abuse survivor?

How is she going to worship a God who could simply cover His eyes and pretend that the injustice she suffered had simply never happened? Living forever with a God like that would be like living forever with a family that protected and made excuses for her abuser. She needs to know that God is righteous! She needs to know that God did not turn a blind eye to her suffering. She needs to know that – in a world that is marred by corruption and tainted by injustice – there is a God who is impartial and who is going to judge the world with perfect righteousness. And that's exactly who our God is! The cross proves it! The gospel must include justice, or else it is not good news.

The same is true, by the way, for the person on the other side of this equation. If God is not righteous, then how is the gospel good news for the repentant abuser?

If he comes to see his sin for what it is, how will he ever be free from a life of punishing himself for the sin that he has committed? He knows that his sin is awful! He knows that something needs to be done! But if the gospel is simply, "Don't worry, God has swept it under the rug and forgotten all about it", then how could he possibly have peace? He will live a life of self-loathing and he will punish himself to try to atone for the wrong that he has done! Some of you might be playing that scenario out in your own lives right now. The gospel must include justice – it must include the news that sin has received exactly the punishment that it deserved – or else it is not good news.

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You*, (The Good Book Company, 2014), 85.

And, Paul says, the cross is the place where we see just that. God is righteous. I need to see that. And, seeing that, I will be better prepared to see:

3. My justification

Immediately after the indictment of verse 23, look at what Paul goes on to say:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24 ESV)

In just a few short words, Paul presents us with powerful images and analogies that help us to wrap our mind around what was accomplished at the cross.

First, consider the word “justified”. This is a legal term and, in using it, Paul directs our minds to the courtroom. The Perfect, Holy Judge sits before us. Our record of sin is undeniable. “All have sinned”, and even the most self-righteous among us will fall to his face in shame as his private sin is exposed before our Righteous God.

And yet, there is a twist. In spite of the fact that I am guilty, the Judge pronounces me innocent! All of the sin that ought to condemn me and send me to hell has been erased from the record! It is gone! It was placed on Christ, and I bear it no more! I am justified!

Paul goes on to further describe this grace as “redemption”. Here, he is using the language of the slave market. This imagery would have been familiar to the 1st century church in Rome. Often, if a person fell into financial hardship, they would sell themselves into slavery to pay off the debt. This was commonplace. The only way out of this slavery was to settle the debt, but most were unable to pay such a price.

Paul uses this word – redemption – to paint a picture of Christ spending his own blood – his own life – to purchase us out of slavery! Christ has settled our debt! As you look to the cross, you should see freedom! You should see a love that breaks the chains of sin – a love that purchased you out of death at great cost!

And Paul uses one last image to describe God's grace. Look with me at verse 25 where Paul describes Jesus as the one:

whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (Romans 3:25a ESV)

The word "propitiation" is undoubtedly the most foreign to us out of all of the powerful, imagery-laden words that Paul has used thus far. Commentator Douglas Moo notes of the Greek word that Paul uses here:

In its only other use in the New Testament (Heb. 9:5) and in twenty-one of its twenty-seven occurrences in the LXX, *hilasterion* refers to what NIV calls the "atonement cover" (what used to be called the "mercy seat") – the cover of the ark where sacrificial blood was sprinkled as a means of propitiating God's wrath.⁷

This word would have reminded Paul's readers of the bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament. To say that Jesus is the "propitiation" for our sins is to say that he is the place where God's wrath against our sin was justly and finally resolved. "Propitiation" means "the removal of wrath."⁸

Our righteous God *hates* sin. He must. He is holy, spotless, unblemished, pure, loving and good. Therefore, our sin – all of the selfishness, the pride, the destruction, and the idolatry that ruins the world and defames God and His creation – sits under God's righteous and holy wrath. He hates it.

So, how can sinners be restored to a holy God? How can we be made one with Him? We need atonement – we need a way to draw near to God that deals honestly and rigorously with the sin that should keep us far from Him.

And, Paul says, the cross is like the mercy seat of the ark where the high priest would apply the blood of the atonement sacrifice. The cross is the place where God's wrath against sin was satisfied – was propitiated – so that we can forever enjoy His smile upon us.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 129.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, *Pillar New Testament Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 180.

Paul is writing this letter because it is absolutely necessary that we understand these realities. At the cross, God has justified, redeemed and made atonement for me. Hallelujah! I need to see that!

And finally, Paul says, I need to see:

4. The gift of grace

It's not enough to know that I'm a sinner and that God is righteous. If that's all I knew, it would be a recipe for despair! It's not even enough to know that God has justified, redeemed, and made atonement for me. I still need to know how I can *lay hold of* that grace! That's what Paul addresses in verses 23-24. Let's look there one last time:

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified **by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24 ESV)

What a gloriously loaded word! A GIFT! This is imagery that even a child can understand! When you look at the cross, you must understand that there was nothing – there IS nothing – there will never be ANYTHING that you can do to deserve this!

No! Paul is careful to say that we are justified by God's grace, as a GIFT!

We didn't earn our place into the family of God. We didn't battle our way onto the team. Again, as Paul says in chapter 5:

but God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

While we were still sinners. While we were still undeserving. Before we even knew enough to *ask*. God gave us this incredible gift of grace!

But how do we lay hold this gift? Who are the ones who receive this justification? Look again at verse 26:

so that he might be just and the justifier of **the one who has faith in Jesus**. (Romans 3:26 ESV)

I said off the top that knowledge is only power if it is knowledge of something powerful. Well, in the same way, faith in and of itself is not powerful. The saving power is found in the OBJECT of your faith. And the only faith that has the power to save is faith that is placed in Jesus Christ.

Do you have that faith? Do you know what that looks like? Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes this so beautifully:

The man who has faith is the man who is no longer looking at himself, and no longer looking to himself. He no longer looks at anything he once was. He does not look at what he is now. He does not look at what he hopes to be... He looks entirely to the Lord Jesus Christ and his finished work, and he rests on that alone.⁹

What are you looking to this morning? What are you resting in? What are you seeing as you look at the cross of Christ?

We are going to partake of the Lord's Supper right now, and before we do that, we always read Paul's warning to the Corinthians. He writes:

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29 ESV)

Don't eat and drink today without discerning the body – without looking to Christ and seeing what you are meant to see. Look to the cross of Christ. What is it that you see?

Do you see your sin?

Do you see your righteous God? Do you see that he has punished your sin in Christ and that you can stop punishing yourself? Do you see that He has punished the sin of those who have wronged you and that there is no reason for you to harbour unforgiveness and hatred in your heart?

⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones as quoted by Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 For You*, (The Good Book Company, 2014), 82.

Do you see your justification? You have been declared innocent!

Do you see your redemption? You have been purchased out of sin and death at so great a cost!

Do you see your atonement? God's wrath against your sin is gone!

Do you see the greatest gift in the history of the world?

If you don't see that, then I want to invite you to let the elements pass you by today.

But, if by the grace of God, your eyes have been opened, then I want to invite you to lay hold of this gift today in faith. Confess your sin. Put your trust in Jesus Christ. Come to the table, and, with gratitude and wonder, behold the cross of Christ.

Let's pray.