

A Bold Humility

Romans 3:21–31 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: September 10, 2025, at Utah Valley University, a young man sat and listened to people who disagreed with everything he stood for, then he calmly articulated the biblical position. In the midst of his words, a man sent a bullet through his chest, casting him suddenly into eternity. There was only one Charlie Kirk; he possessed gifts that I cannot give you. However, the Spirit that compelled him, I can give you. What equips a man to sit humbly while insults and threats are hurled at him, and answer boldly when it is time for him to respond - that is what we wish to send onto the campus of this nation.

CONTEXT: For nearly three chapters now, we have observed the Apostle Paul as he has served as a **prosecuting attorney**, indicting every living person for violating the Law of God, thereby incurring His just and eternal wrath. He has played the role of a **Spiritual Physician**, laying the soul bare under the light of truth, saying, *“You see, there it is, a tumor that is terminal”*. He has examined use from head to toe, finding not one single inch of our person that has not been touched by the effect of sin.

Beyond that, **he has left us no remedy** that may deliver us.

- If we claim **ignorance of the law**, he declares that there is a measure of natural revelation that makes us accountable. There is creation without and conscience within.
- If we seek to hide within the **knowledge of the law**, he declares that only compounds our problem and maximizes our accountability.

Last week, he showed that we are all on heaven’s death row, under sin, awaiting that final sentence when we are all alike cast into the lake of fire. The result of the first three chapters of Romans is that every mouth is silenced - there is no defense, there is no excuse, we are condemned as guilty before a Holy God. He has us where he wants us.

And then, just as our verdict is read, just before the Heavenly hammer drops, just before the Judge declares us guilty and seals our fate forever, he introduced those two marvelous words in verse 21, **“But now”**. Those two words are the hinge on which his entire argument turns. They offer us hope - they offer us a way out.

The great Welsh preacher **Martyn Lloyd-Jones** once said that if he were dying and could only preach one phrase to a dying world, those two words would be it. **But now**.

Martin Luther called this passage that follows *“the chief point and the very central place of the epistle to the Romans and of the whole Bible.”*

TEXT: Romans 3:21–31 (ESV)

²¹ 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

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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.

There we see the...

1. The Revelation of God's Righteousness (vs. 21-23) "But now" It means this: the long-promised, long-prophesied, long-awaited salvation of God has finally arrived in the person of Jesus Christ.

- The **Old Testament saints** longed for this day.
- The **prophets** searched and inquired about it (1 Peter 1:10–11 ESV).
- **Abraham** saw it from afar and was glad (John 8:56 ESV).
- **Moses** pointed to it in every shadow and type.
- **David** sang of it in his psalms.
- **Isaiah** painted it in unbearable colors of grief and glory.

But they only saw the shadow, perhaps a silhouette. They heard the footsteps. They could smell the incense of Heaven. But they did not see **WHO** was approaching...

Paul says — but now —

- The One they longed to see has been seen.
- The One they sang about has been crucified.
- The One they hoped in has been raised.

The age of **promise** has given way to the age of **fulfillment**.

The verb **pephanerōtai** (**pe FANE ro tai**), translated "has been made manifest," is in the perfect tense. It means a past action whose effects continue into the present. In other words, the righteousness of God has been manifested — and it is still being manifested.

Now notice what has been manifested: the righteousness of God.

This is saying that the righteousness of God has been **provided** by God, and may be **possessed** by you, so long as you wish to possess His righteousness on His terms.

Now we said in a previous sermon that righteousness is not simply goodness, nor is it the same as godliness.

- **Godliness** has to do with our vertical relationship to God Himself.
- **Righteousness** has to do with our practical behavior horizontally with our fellow man.

So when Paul writes of the Righteousness of God, he means God's practical behavior. That is what has been provided for us to possess.

APPLY: Graduates, can you imagine the stir it would cause on campus if you actually walked through the halls of that academic institution as one who actually possesses

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the righteousness of God? Why some of the students may actually be converted simply because you are there.

It may be said of you as it was said of Peter and John - **Acts 4:13 (ESV)** ¹³ Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

NOW - Paul has gone to great lengths to prove to us that this sort of thing doesn't come from simply being born into the right family. Nor does it come from hanging around those places where the law of God is proclaimed.

How then does one experience this manifestation of righteousness? I mean really, not only conceptually. But how does one get this righteousness into themselves?

Well, Paul tells us, not only the Revelation of God's Righteousness... but notice...

2. The Reckoning of God's Righteousness (vs. 24-25) What a great word that is - Reckoning. It is from the Old English "gerecenian" - yeh RETCH-eh-nee-ahn.

- It was first used as an accounting term of setting the numbers out clearly and straight.
- It is used in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to describe a setting, our history in clear order, as it actually was.
- Doc Holliday used it in the movie "Tombstone" to describe the dispensing of Justice soon to come by the sidearm of Wyatt Earp.

So this is a Reckoning of God's Righteousness. It will be set straight up you and within you. This is not something that is worked up or developed; this is not the sort of thing that one accomplishes. God will do the Reckoning. In what way?

a. You are Declared Righteous - *Justification*

²⁴ and are **justified** by his grace as a gift,

The Greek word δικαιούμενοι (dee-kai-OO-meh-noi)

This was not a word Paul coined; it was a common Greek word that was used by men like Herodotus and Thucydides. It means to be actually right, or correct.

It does not mean "to be made righteous" in the sense of moral improvement. It means "declared actually righteous" in the sense of a legal verdict.

It means more than simply, "You are guilty, but we are going to let it go this time." It

carries the idea not only of the absence of guilt but also of the presence of innocence. Those are not the same thing - you see.

ILLUSTRATION: In a court of law, the legal code of the United States is supposed to
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PRESUME you are innocent, but that doesn't mean you're actually innocent. It simply means that ***the burden of proof is on the prosecution to prove your guilt.***

This word means more than that - it means the Judge's Gavel has fallen and He has once and for all DECLARED you actually innocent, no longer presumed, but actual innocence. And how does this happen? "By his grace as a gift." Three Greek words right next to each other.

δωρεάν (dōrean) — "freely" / "as a gift" / "without cost" (Do you know someone named Dorean - her name means "gift")

Locally, we have a health center called "Charis House." Charis means - "Grace." τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι (tē autou chariti) — "by his grace"

Paul says your JUSTIFICATION is Dorean Charis - a GIFT of GRACE. No charge.

ILLUSTRATION: Julie's grandmother, "Mama Lee," used to say, "I don't know why everyone doesn't become a Christian, it doesn't cost a dime". She was right, AND she was wrong - it doesn't cost you anything, but it cost Jesus everything.

Not only are you Declared Righteous...

b. Delivered from Bondage - Redemption

24b. through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus.

The Greek word is **apolytrōsis** (ah-poh-LOO-troh-sis). In the first century, this was a word from the slave market. When a man fell into debt or was captured in war, he could be sold into slavery. But there was a custom by which someone — a friend, a family member, a benefactor — could come along and pay the **lytron** {LOO-tron) — the ransom price — and buy that man out of slavery.

Now, in the ancient slave market, your value may be set based on your age, your gender, your strength, your intellect, and any number of things.

- A young child - 300 Denari
- An educated Adult Male - 15,000 Denari

But the slave market on which your soul stood in bondage had a set price for all - the wages of sin is death. That is the LOO-tron. That is the price. But who on earth could, by His death, by the shedding of His blood, pay the redemption price for all mankind? Paul tells us - 24b. through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus.

Yes Paul tells us in Galatians 3:13 (ESV)

13 Christ **redeemed** us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... The Law cried out - you owe me a penalty of death because you have broken the law of God. But Christ, through his death, paid your ransom.

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1 Peter 1:18–19 (ESV)

18 knowing that you were **redeemed** from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 **but with the precious blood of Christ**, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot

Again he writes in... **1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (ESV)**

19 ...You are not your own, 20 for **you were bought with a price.**

NOW - if Christ redeemed us, paid our bondage price, and He did so by His death, to whom did He pay this redemption?

c. Diverted Wrath - Propitiation

²⁵ whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood.

Now we come to perhaps the most theologically loaded word in the New Testament. The English word “propitiation” translates the Greek word “hilastērion”.

In the Greek Old Testament — the Septuagint — hilastērion is the very word used for the mercy seat — the gold-covered lid of the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle.

Leviticus 16:1–22 (ESV) describes that Aaron was to select two goats and cast lots for the two goats. One was to be sacrificed to the Lord, and the other was called the goat of Azazel.

After much preparation, Aaron was to take the blood of the goat being sacrificed and enter into the Inner Sanctum, the Holy of Holies, and sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times in front of the mercy seat, which was the screen over the ark of the covenant - the ark was a footstool of the Lord. Then he was to sprinkle the blood onto the mercy seat.

Then Aaron would lay his hands on the head of the Goat of Azazel and confess the iniquities of the people, all their transgressions, and all their sins. Then the goat would be sent into the wilderness, symbolically carrying the people's sins away from them.

Do you see the significance of Jesus being crucified on the Passover? Of the people choosing Barabbas, the murderer, and sending him away, and sending Jesus, the innocent, as the sacrifice? Jesus death was the ultimate hilastērion. This didn't happen in some hidden corner - it was public for all to see, the Jews had a part, the Romans had a part, the Greeks had a part - this is why his title was written in three languages:

Hebrew, Latin, and Greek - over the cross - King of the Jews.

Where did he die? My Moriah, the same place Abraham bound Isaac, and God said, "No, stop, God will provide himself the lamb) Gen. 22.

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The Righteousness of God has been REVEALED, it has been RECKONED, via Justification, Redemption, and Propitiation...but hear me carefully... none of that makes one solitary difference, without verses 25-26.

3. The Receiving of God's Righteousness (vs. 25b-28) 25b. to be received **by faith**.

Faith is the conduit of God's promise, through which grace flows into your soul.

Wherever you are, whatever you have done, if you will simply take God at His Word, that these things have been done for you, on your behalf, not seeking to contribute some of your self-righteousness into the equation, claim the death of Christ as your own, and all of this shall be yours. ***Why did God, in His infinite wisdom, do it this way?***

25b. 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.

Hidden in verse 25b is a small Greek word that opens up a massive theological problem. The word is ***parensis***. The ESV translates it "passed over" — "in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."

Parensis does not mean ***forgiveness***. It means ***postponement***. For four thousand years of biblical history, from Adam to the cross, God did not bring final judgment on the sins of His people. He passed them over. He did not call in the debt.

- King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then orchestrated the death of her husband, Uriah. God sent Nathan the prophet to finger him with a parable. "Why have you despised me?" the Lord asks (2 Samuel 12:9 ESV, paraphrased). David is a broken man. He confesses, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan says, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Samuel 12:13 ESV). Just like that.

Now hear the question that ought to keep every honest soul awake at night: by what righteous principle did God do that? If a human judge keeps letting murderers walk free, eventually we must ask whether that judge is just — or whether he is corrupt.

If God keeps passing over sin, generation after generation, what does that say about His holiness? How could the world go through Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and

Persia and Greece and Rome — and all the wickedness those civilizations committed — and not be incinerated? How can God be patient with this present generation, with all the atrocities of the twenty-first century on its hands, and not destroy it?

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Paul answers in verse 25: “This was to show God’s righteousness.” The cross is God’s public demonstration to a watching universe that every sin He had been passing over for four thousand years had to be paid for in blood.

Every Old Testament sacrifice was an installment payment on a debt that could not be cleared by the blood of bulls and goats. And on Friday at three o’clock in the afternoon, on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem, the full sum of the debt was paid. **Tetelestai** — it is finished. The Judge of all the earth has been shown to do right.

And so we come to the great climactic phrase of the entire paragraph. Verse 26: **“so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”** Stop and feel the weight of that phrase. Just and the justifier. **Dikaion kai dikaiounta.** Δίκαιον και δικαιοῦντα - (dee-KAI-on, kai, dee-kai-OON-ta)

Two forms of the same root word, side by side.

ILLUSTRATION: Recently on Code Red, I hosted the Supreme Justice of the District Court of Atlanta. In the human courtroom, a judge can only be one or the other. • He can be just — in which case he must condemn the guilty.

• Or he can be merciful — in which case he must let the guilty off.

He cannot be both at the same time, because to be both at the same time would compromise either his justice or his mercy.

But at the cross, God did the thing the human courtroom could never do. He found a way to be just — by punishing sin to the full — and be the justifier — by declaring sinners righteous — at the same time. **Psalm 85:10** was fulfilled in real time on Calvary: “Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10 ESV).

They were estranged. They were on opposite sides of the universe. But God arranged a meeting at the cross. And there, with His Son bleeding on the wood, justice was satisfied to its uttermost demand, and mercy flowed unhindered to the worst of sinners.

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION:

Graduates, go forth from here **Justified, Redeemed**, your sin **Propitiated** by the blood of God’s Son, having received it as a free gift of grace by faith. Walk forth from here with that rarest of all virtues - Humble Boldness.

- **Humble** - because you know the debt your sin required.
- **Boldness** - because you are the object of the affection of one who was willing to pay the debt.

That will change your campus. Some will love you, rise up and call you blessed! Others may try to crucify you. But they cannot ignore you.

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EXTRA MATERIAL IF SERMON ENDS TOO SOON:

ILLUSTRATION: Tim Keller used to say that the difference between a Pharisee and a Christian is not that the Pharisee repents of his sins and the Christian repents of his sins. They both repent of their sins. The difference is this: the Christian also repents of his righteousness. The Christian gives up not only his bad deeds but also his good deeds as a basis for standing before God. He puts down his trophies as well as his garbage. He brings his diplomas to the cross along with his crimes.

ILLUSTRATION: Tim Keller used to tell a story about a successful financial advisor in his Manhattan congregation who was converted three years before the financial crash of 2008. When the markets collapsed, this man lost a tremendous amount of money — most of his net worth. Some weeks later, Keller had lunch with him and asked how he was doing. The man said, “Tim, I have never been happier in my life. And I’ll tell you why. Three years ago, my wealth was my righteousness. It was the proof of who I was. It was the trophy at the center of my identity. If this had happened to me three years ago — before I came to Christ — I know where the vodka bottle is and I would have driven myself right into the ground. But Christ has become my righteousness. So now my wealth is just wealth. I can lose it without losing me.”

That is what Paul means in verse 27. Boasting has been excluded. Your righteousness has been moved out of yourself and into Christ. And nothing — not bankruptcy, not cancer, not betrayal, not death itself — can ever take Christ from you.

ILLUSTRATION: Donnelly tells the story of a Scottish minister who once asked a godly old saint in his church — not to test her, but to draw her out. He said, “Janet, you have trusted Christ. But what would you say if, at the end, the Lord were to cast you away?”

The old woman smiled, and she said, “Well, He would lose more than I would.” Do you hear what Janet is saying? She is not boasting in her own goodness. She is boasting in the goodness of the Judge. She is saying, If the Lord were to cast me away, He would lose more than I would, because He would no longer be just. If the propitiation was real, if the blood was sufficient, if the wrath was satisfied — then for God to cast away a sinner who has cast herself on that blood would be for God to violate His own justice. And God will never do that.