

But Now...

Romans 3:21-31

© March 31st, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans

Over the last couple of months we have been working our way through the book of Romans. Romans was a letter written by Paul to Christians in the city of Rome. He hoped to be able to visit them one day, but until that time came, he was writing to them to make sure they understood the gospel message. As such, Romans gives a thorough explanation of the Christian faith, and is probably the most systematic explanation of the gospel in all of scripture.

Often, on Easter, we break away from our regular sermon series to preach specifically on the Easter story, but this morning I have elected to continue in our study of Romans, because where we are dovetails nicely with the Easter celebration.

If you haven't been here, throughout the first three chapters of Romans Paul has been making the point that none of us is able to please God in our own strength. Each one of us is desperately sinful. Paul has shown the insufficiency of several ways we attempt to appear righteous (or good) before God. Some people claim ignorance, but Paul pointed out that the created order points to God...we just choose to suppress the truth about Him in our own minds. That is not something for which we can blame God, but something for which we bear the blame.

He then pointed to the fact that sometimes we compare ourselves to others and conclude that we're actually pretty good people, because we aren't nearly as bad as some of the others in the world. That assumes God grades on a curve—but He doesn't. God has given us His law and expects us to follow it. When we break God's law, we are no longer in right standing with Him.

Still others would point to their religious activities. They conclude that since they have been baptized, go to church, know all the songs, serve in various capacities, or even know the scriptures, then those things must make them right with God. This is a pervasive notion among religious people—the idea that because we do religious things, God must be pleased with us and will therefore overlook our sin. That simply isn't the case. These things are good and valuable but will not erase or overcome our sinful past.

Admittedly, this doesn't sound like a particularly uplifting message, right? But Paul is building a case. He knows that until we grasp the depth of our sin, the rest of the gospel message won't make any sense. That is why he has belabored the point that we are all desperately sinful. Today we get to turn the corner in his argument. Having established the bad news, Paul now turns his attention to some truly wonderful news.

A Way to Be Made Right

We pick up in Romans 3 and we'll look first at verses 21-22,

²¹ But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. ²² We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. (Romans 3:21-22, NLT)

Paul has shown us the futility of all the things we try to do to make ourselves right in God's eyes. In verse 21 he shifts gears with the important words, "But now..." And what follows is profound. He tells us that God has shown us a way to be righteous that isn't based on our ability to keep the law. Other translations say, "But now a righteousness from God has been revealed." The first question you might have is, what does righteousness mean? Righteousness is being in right standing before God. In other words, to be righteous means to be free of the penalty of sin. It is important to note where Paul says this righteousness comes from—it is from God. In other words, Paul has shown us that we can't be righteous in our own strength, but that God has made it possible for us to be made righteous, not through our strength, but His.

And what is this means of righteousness? Paul tells us that it is by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. The way of salvation is the same for every person, no matter who they are or what their background is. Every one of us is sinful, but every one of us is also given the same means of forgiveness and righteousness—through faith in Jesus Christ. What is faith? Faith involves three things: **First**, an understanding of the facts. Obviously we can't believe until we know what we believe. **Second**, is assent to those facts. This means believing that they are true. **Finally**, is commitment to live by what we believe. So, faith in Jesus requires us to understand that we are sinful, to believe that Jesus died so that we might be forgiven, and then to live a life that relies on and follows Him. Paul says if we do that, we will be in right standing with God.

How?

After telling us that God has made it possible for us to be made right in His sight through faith in Jesus, he then turns his attention to explaining just how this is possible.

²³ For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. ²⁴ Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. ²⁵ For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, ²⁶ for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he makes sinners right in his sight when they believe in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26, NLT)

Paul begins by restating his premise—every single person has sinned, and therefore we are separated from God. But God shows us grace, meaning that He extends a gift we don't deserve to us. He provides the way for us to be made right.

Verse 25 explains how this happens. The answer is that Jesus was made to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin.

Most people do not like to believe that God would ever punish people for their sin. They imagine God will take pity on us, overlook our sin, and forgive us. But that isn't how God works. He is absolutely loving—to a greater degree than we can fathom—but He is not a one-dimensional being. God cannot be described by a single characteristic any more than you or I can be. Though God is loving, He is also just. That means that when people break His law, He will ensure justice is served by punishing the guilty party.

Think about it from a human perspective. A human judge may be a very loving and kind person. But they also understand that those who break the law must be punished. A judge who refuses to punish lawbreakers is a terrible judge because he does not ensure justice is served. No matter how loving the judge may be, he must execute the sentence the law demands. He cannot simply set aside the law because he is loving. His love and justice are not contradictory.

The same is true with the Lord. He is just, so He must punish sin. He cannot simply overlook it. This creates a problem. Each of us is sinful. God must punish our sin. But He also loves us dearly. What is the solution? The solution is Jesus.

Jesus came to the earth as a human being for a specific purpose. He came to live with the same struggles and limitations that we do but would do so without sinning. Because Jesus never sinned, he had no penalty that He owed. He was already in right standing with God. This enabled the next part of the plan. Since Jesus had no sin of His own, He was able to take the penalty that we had incurred for our sin upon Himself. This was what was happening on the cross of Calvary. Jesus was paying the penalty we deserved.

The cross itself was not the punishment for sin. The physical agony of the cross is greater than we can imagine, but that was not the penalty. The penalty was not physical, but spiritual in nature. On the cross, God poured out His just wrath on Jesus, instead of on us. In so doing, the requirements of the law were met. The punishment the law demanded was meted out. We were spared the punishment we deserved—because it was given instead to Jesus, the sinless sacrifice.

The theological term for this process is called “propitiation.” Another word is atonement. These words basically mean that Jesus became our substitute. He made us right with God by taking the punishment we deserved.

Paul explains that because of this, those who place their faith in Jesus are made right in God's sight when they believe. This does not mean we suddenly stop sinning. Even the most devoted Christian continues to fail in many ways (a theme Paul will address later on in Romans.) But it does mean that we are *declared right* in God's eyes. There is another important theological term that describes this process: it is “justification.”

When a person breaks a human law, there is a penalty which must be met. It may be a fine that must be paid or a sentence that must be served. But once the person has met the requirements of the law, we say they have paid their debt to society and so they are once again in right standing with the law. They have been justified. This is what happens through Jesus. We cannot justify ourselves, but through His sacrifice on the cross, those who believe have had their debt satisfied, and they are now declared to be in right standing with God.

Paul explains that this was why God held off on punishing sin before Jesus. For thousands of years people had sinned against God. Every person (save for Jesus) who has ever lived has sinned. Paul was addressing the charge that if God did not punish the sins of people in the past, then He must be unjust. On the contrary. God did not punish their sin at the time because He knew Jesus was coming. Jesus would bear the punishment for their sin, so it was not necessary to punish them. People before Jesus understood from the scriptures that God would provide a way for them to be forgiven. They did not trust in their own righteousness, because they knew they had none. Instead, they waited for God to fulfill the promise of a sacrifice that would make them right before Him. Jesus was the long-awaited sacrifice, and justice was satisfied both for those who came before and those (like you and me) who would come later.

Boasting?

Understanding these truths, Paul takes up a practical question—does this leave us any room for pride?

²⁷ Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. ²⁸ So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. (Romans 3:27-28, NLT)

Paul asks the rhetorical question of whether we can boast about the fact that we are right with God. Of course not! We haven't done anything to make ourselves right in His sight. Jesus is the One who has done everything! All we bring to the table is sin. Jesus supplied the sacrifice.

But one might argue, I am saved because I have faith! I believe when others have not. Therefore, because of my superior insight and intellect, I have trusted in Jesus, while others have chosen to reject Him. If that is the case, then we do have reason to boast. But look at what Paul says in another of His letters.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (Ephesians 2:8, ESV)

Paul said that even our faith is a gift from God. As Paul pointed out in the verses we looked at last week, no one seeks God. No, not even one! This means that even the faith we exercise is ultimately a result of God working in our lives. We can take no credit for our salvation. Rather than leading us to a place of arrogance or pride, faith in Jesus' sacrifice ought to lead to a place of reverent and humble worship and thankfulness.

Faith Alone

Paul wraps up his argument with a couple more rhetorical questions.

²⁹ After all, is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Of course he is. ³⁰ There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. ³¹ Well then, if we emphasize faith, does this mean that we can forget about the law? Of course not! In fact, only when we have faith do we truly fulfill the law. (Romans 3:29-31, NLT)

Paul's first rhetorical question leads to an important conclusion. Paul says there is one God, and He alone makes people right with Him through faith. It doesn't matter who you are or what your background is. There is only one way to be made right with God.

I have often heard people say that it is arrogant for Christians to say that their religion is the only one that is right. There are many religions in the world, so why should the Christian faith be the only one that is valid? Paul gives us the answer. The problem is the same for everyone—we are sinful and the penalty must be paid. But God has provided a way for us to be forgiven while still being just. Jesus is the only sacrifice that solves the problem. You can believe whatever you want, but there is only One who has paid the penalty for you. If we trust in Jesus, our sins will be paid for by Him. If we choose to reject them, we will pay for ourselves. This is not arrogance; it is a simple statement of fact.

Paul then anticipates one more question. He asks, well if we are forgiven by faith, then does the law even matter? Of course it does! Paul points out that by placing our faith in Jesus, we are fulfilling the law, because God's justice is served—the demands of the law are met in Jesus.

Others may say that if Jesus has paid for our sin, then it doesn't matter what we do, because we're forgiven. In other words, we don't need to obey God's law because whatever we do is already paid for. Jesus has indeed paid the penalty for our sin, but that does not mean we should ignore God's commands. The law shows us what God desires from His people. If we understand the gift we have been given in Jesus, it should motivate us to live in a way that pleases and honors Him. We don't do this to earn God's favor, but to honor and show our trust in the One who has shown Himself worthy. A person who has been given a wonderful gift does not spit in the face of the person who gave it to them. They choose to act in a way that honors the gift-giver. This is the response of the Christian to what Jesus has done for us. We don't obey God's commands in hopes of being made right with God (because that doesn't work), we do so to honor the One who has made us right when we didn't deserve it.

Conclusion

As we celebrate Easter today, we are reminded of the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb three days later. Paul reminds us why those things matter. We each have a debt of sin we owe to God. We stand condemned because of it. *But now*, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can be forgiven, we can have our relationship with God restored. Everything is different because of the cross.

So, understanding these truths, let's draw some final applications. **First, we see God's love at the cross.** The ultimate picture of love is Jesus, who was sinless, taking upon Himself the punishment that we deserved. He did this so we could be forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God. Through Him, we can enjoy the relationship God intended both now and forevermore. God could have left us to our own devices, He could have simply punished us as our sin deserved, but He didn't. He provided a way for us to be forgiven. There is no greater picture of love than the cross.

Second, we see God's justice at the cross. The reason the cross was necessary was because God must punish sin. He is good and right and just, and therefore our sin must be punished. God cannot simply dismiss our sin and declare that it doesn't matter. Jesus was punished on the cross—He took the punishment we deserve so we wouldn't have to. To assume that because God loves people, He will not punish sin is a fool's errand. God's love and justice are not contradictory. We see both on full display at the cross. This leads us to the third application.

Third, Jesus' sacrifice demands a response from us. Paul does not say that because of Jesus' sacrifice everyone is made right with God. He says that everyone who believes, who has faith in Jesus, will be forgiven. We must each answer the question of what we will do with Jesus for ourselves. It is not enough to know the facts, or even to believe they are true. The question is whether we will live in the light of that truth. You must decide whether you will embrace these truths and follow Jesus, or whether you will ignore them. Paul has clearly shown us what is at stake, so now we each must decide how we will respond.

While this may not be a traditional Easter text, the message Paul gives us has the fingerprints of Easter all over it. Prior to the cross, we were in deep weeds. We owed a debt to God we could never pay. *But now*, because of the cross, because of what Jesus has done, we can be made right. We can stand forgiven before God through faith in Jesus. The proof that this is true was seen when Jesus rose on the third day. He proved that He was not merely a man who was unjustly accused by evil men. He proved He was God, come to earth, who died in our place. And through Him, we can have right standing with God and live, even though we die. Everything changes because of Easter.

I don't know where you're coming from today. Maybe you're in this church every week, maybe this is your first time in church ever. Maybe you're somewhere in between. I hope you see that this message is for each one of us. We are in desperate need of a Savior, and Easter reminds us that God has provided one. You may have been trying all sorts of things in the hopes that you can be good enough to earn God's favor and get to Heaven. Let me set your mind at ease...you're not good enough. Nothing you do, no amount of religious activity can make you right with God. But there is good news—you don't have to, because Jesus has done what you can't. This Easter, I pray it will be the day you embrace Jesus, the forgiveness He offers, and follow Him both now and forevermore.

© March 31st, 2024 by Rev. Rick Goettsche SERIES: Romans