

Sunday, May 10, 2025- Grace, Atonement, and Justification-Pastor John Henry Raskin

How does God remain perfectly just and still forgive sinners?

How does a guilty person get declared righteous?

How does what Jesus did actually get applied to you?

The answers lie at the very heart of the gospel, in these three life-changing words:

Grace. Atonement. Justification.

1. Grace

A Gift You Did Not Earn and Do Not Deserve

Grace means God gives salvation freely, not because of what we have done, but because of who He is.

- We were spiritually dead, not merely wounded or struggling. Dead people cannot revive themselves.
- Grace is a gift, not a wage. The moment it is earned, it ceases to be grace.
- Grace eliminates boasting. Our salvation leaves no room for pride, only humble gratitude.

"By grace you have been saved through faith... not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2:8–9)

Grace is God, motivated by love, giving what sinners do not deserve and could never earn.

2. Atonement

The Price That Had to Be Paid

Grace does not ignore sin. It deals with it fully and justly.

- God is perfectly loving and perfectly just. Justice demands that sin be punished.
- On the cross, Jesus became our substitute, taking the punishment our sins deserved.
- Justice was not set aside — it was satisfied. The penalty was fully paid.

"The Lord laid on Him the sins of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

At the cross, God's justice was upheld and His mercy was displayed- both perfectly at the same time.

3. Justification

The Verdict That Changes Everything

Justification is a legal declaration made by God.

- To justify means to declare righteous, not to slowly make righteous.
- God declares sinners "not guilty" because of Christ's righteousness, not our own.
- This verdict is once-for-all and permanent.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1)

Our standing before God is secure, not because of who we are, but because of Who Christ is and what He has done.

What This Means for You

- You are not saved by trying harder, but by trusting fully in Jesus' Name.
- Your worst sins are not greater than Christ's finished work.
- Your peace with God rests on a settled verdict, not your ongoing performance.
- **The gospel offers more than hope — it offers assurance.**

Next week: Part 4 — The Response: Repentance and Faith

UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL Part 3 of 5

Grace, Atonement, and Justification

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Imagine you owe a debt you could never pay.

Perhaps it's a financial debt, or maybe something deeper, something more personal, a real transgression of which you knew you were guilty and which carried an extreme penalty.

Now imagine you are on trial standing before a perfectly just judge who is bound to make his decision based on the law alone.

This judge knows every wrong thing you have ever done, every person you have ever hurt, every selfish thought, every moment you turned away from the God who made you — all of it laid out in open court.

You have an accuser who is also the prosecutor. Within the framework of the Law, his charges demand payment for justice to be served.

When the judge asks you to speak on your own behalf, you have nothing to offer.

And then, someone steps forward and says: I will pay it. All of it. On his behalf.

That is the story we are telling today.

Over the past two weeks we have been building a foundation leading to an understanding of the Gospel.

In Part 1, we saw that God is holy, righteous, and just — and that every human being has broken His moral law and stands guilty before Him.

We learned about His character, that He is not only Holy and therefore must judge and punish sin, but also perfect in His love for us.

In Part 2, we looked at the Bridge God built for us from His side:

Jesus, fully God and fully man, who lived the perfect life we could not live and died the death we deserved to provide a way for this Holy God to be with us, even given our sinful nature.

Today, we ask the most important questions of all:

How does God remain perfectly just and still forgive sinners?

How does a guilty person get declared righteous?

How does what Jesus did actually get applied to you?

The answer is found in three words that sit at the very heart of the gospel:

Grace. Atonement. Justification.

These words are not complicated theological jargon reserved for seminary classrooms.

These are the words that describe the most wonderful transaction in the history of the universe.

Here is a scripture that illuminates all three.

We saw this scripture last week but let's use the NLT this time.

Romans 3:21-26 NLT

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.

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.

The first concept we need to understand is grace.

I. Grace: A Gift You Did Not Earn and Cannot Deserve

Most of us have grown up in a world that runs on merit.

You work hard and you get the grade.

You perform well at work and you get the raise. You earn what you receive.

That system makes sense to us. It feels fair.

And so... when we think about God, we naturally assume the same logic applies; be good enough, do enough good things, and perhaps God will accept you.

But the gospel announces something that turns that assumption completely upside down.

Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9 NKJV

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Notice three things Paul says here to illuminate the concept of Grace.

1. Grace came to us while we were spiritually dead

Paul does not say God helped people who were spiritually wounded or struggling. He says we were dead.

A corpse cannot do anything to improve its condition. It cannot earn its way back to life. It can only be raised by someone else. Someone with the power to do so.

Spiritually dead is the condition every one of us is born into before we receive new life through faith and a relationship with Christ Jesus.

Not spiritually sick. Not spiritually confused. Spiritually Dead.

Grace, then, is not God assisting our efforts. It is God doing what we could never do for ourselves. Raising our dead spirits to life.

2. Grace is a gift, not a transaction

Paul is ruthlessly clear here: salvation is not the result of works.

It is a gift. And here is why that matters: a gift cannot be earned.

The moment you start earning it, it stops being a gift and becomes a wage.

The very nature of grace is that it is unmerited; given freely to people who have no rightful claim to it whatsoever.

This should be deeply humbling.

It means we can't stand before God and say, 'I deserve this.'

But it also means we can't stand before God and say, 'I don't deserve this, so I can't receive it.'

Grace is not about what we deserve. It is about who God is.

3. Grace eliminates boasting

Paul says grace means 'no one may boast.'

This is significant because boasting, pride in our own spiritual performance... is the great enemy of the gospel.

It is by Grace through faith that we are saved, and Paul says even the faith is not of ourselves but the gift of God.

The moment salvation, in our own minds, becomes in any way our own achievement, we may become boastful and that leads to becoming judgmental.

Grace removes that entirely. In Christ, all we can do is receive this beautiful gift and give sincere and humble thanks.

Simply stated, grace is this: God, motivated by love, freely gives what sinners do not deserve and could never earn.

But grace had to accomplish something specific. It had to deal with the very real problem of sin and the just wrath of God.

That brings us to our second word... Atonement.

II. Atonement: The Price That Had to Be Paid

The word atonement means the reparation, satisfaction or amends made for a wrong, or injury to another party.

In theological terms, it describes what Jesus accomplished on the cross to deal with sin.

To understand atonement, we have to go back to something we established in Part 1 of our series.

God is not only loving — He is also perfectly just. And justice, by definition, requires that wrongs be punished.

Sin is not a small thing to God. It is a cosmic offence — a creature rebelling against its Creator, a rejection of the One in whom all life and goodness are found.

So the question that has hung over all human history is this: How can God be both just and merciful at the same time?

How can He both punish sin fully and forgive sinners freely?

The answer is the cross.

We read this passage from the Prophet Isaiah last week, describing Jesus' punishment and the reason for it.

As it describes the atonement made for sin. Let's read it again, only this time, from the NLT, for clarity.

Isaiah 53:4–6 NLT

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought His troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for His own sins! 5 But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. 6 All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

This passage, written seven centuries before Jesus was born, describes with stunning clarity what the cross would accomplish.

Notice the exchange: our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities, were laid on Him. The punishment that belonged to us fell on Jesus instead.

This is the heart of the doctrine of atonement, and specifically what theologians call substitutionary atonement — Jesus standing in our place, bearing our penalty.

Now let's return to the beginning of today's message.

You are on trial. The judge reads the verdict: guilty.

The sentence is announced. It is perfectly just according to the law.

The Prosecutor (who in this case is Satan) smirks with satisfaction.

Every charge he brought against you is true and the sentence is fair.

Suddenly, someone walks into the room, approaches the bench, and says to the judge:

I will take his sentence. I will serve his punishment. Let him go free.

Now here is the crucial question: would it be just for the judge to accept that offer? And the answer is: Only if the substitute truly pays the full penalty.

Only if the debt is genuinely settled and the offended party agrees.

But wait... in this trial, who is the offended party?

Why, none other than the Judge Himself. God.

Only He is free to accept the substitute.

And so this Judge, who is not only infinitely just but also infinitely merciful, is willing to accept the substitute and if the punishment is fully absorbed... then justice has been satisfied.

The guilty party can walk free, not because justice was ignored, but because justice was fully carried out.

That is what Jesus did. The punishment that our sin required did not disappear. It did not get waved away. It was absorbed — completely and finally — by Jesus Christ on the cross.

III. Justification: The Verdict That Changes Everything

Justification is a legal term. Justification means 'to declare righteous.' It is a verdict. A declaration. It happens in a moment, and it is permanent.

Notice that it is only a declaration of righteousness. It means you are treated in the eyes of the Law as righteous.

It does not mean you have been made righteous in the sense of moral improvement — that is called sanctification, and it comes later.

When God justifies a sinner, He looks at that person, not in themselves, but in Christ, and He declares: Not guilty. Righteous.

In the eyes of God, they are accepted.

Romans 3:24 in the NKJV tells us we are: **justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.**

This verse tells us clearly that the source of our justification is God's grace.

Not our moral improvement. Not our religious devotion. Not our good intentions. Justification is given freely.

We do not earn it. We do, however, need to receive it.

The second part of this scripture explains the grounds for this justification.

'Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'

The grounds for our justification before God is Christ's redemptive work.

The word redemption carries the image of a ransom — a price paid to secure freedom for a captive or a slave.

Jesus' death was the ransom.

His righteousness is the ground on which God can legally declare us righteous.

This is critically important:

As we learned last week, God does not declare us righteous because we have become righteous enough.

He declares us righteous because Christ's righteousness has been imputed — credited — to us.

Our standing before God is not based on who we are.

It is based on who Jesus is and what He has done.

For the person who is in Christ, the final verdict has already been delivered.

There is no future trial where our standing before God is still in question.

Romans 8:1 declares: **'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'**

Not 'there will be no condemnation eventually.'

Not 'there is less condemnation.'

There is now no condemnation. Past tense. Done. Settled.

This is the peace that the gospel offers — not a vague hope that things will probably work out, but a rock-solid assurance grounded in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

Let me tell you a story as a means of illustration.

A renowned violinist was once given a violin made by the master craftsman Antonio Stradivari — one of the most valuable instruments in the world.

During a performance the violin slipped and shattered on the stage.

The musician could not repair it. He did not have the skill. He did not have the resources.

The instrument, on its own, was beyond recovery.

A master restorer stepped forward. He spent months carefully, painstakingly restoring every piece.

When the work was finished, the violin was returned to the musician — not merely repaired but declared by the appraisers fully restored.

The musician did not pay for the restoration. He could not have. He simply received it as a gift.

That is the gospel. We are the broken instrument. We cannot restore ourselves.

Jesus is the master who did what we could never do. And when God looks at those who are in Christ, He does not see the shattered pieces

of our lives — He sees the restoration that His Son accomplished, and He declares it complete.

Perhaps you have done things you believe are too bad to be forgiven. You have a list in your mind of these things — and looking at that list, you cannot imagine God accepting you.

Grace says this: God's decision to justify you is not based on a list. It is based on Christ's work and if you believe in it.

The question is not whether your sin is too great. Any sin is too great to be written off by a just God.

The question is whether Christ's atonement is sufficient. The Bible's answer is an unqualified yes.

Perhaps you are exhausted from trying to be good enough. You go to church. You read your Bible. You serve. You give. And somewhere in the back of your mind, you are still not quite sure if it is enough.

Justification says this: it is not about enough. Christ's righteousness is not supplemented by yours. It is the sole ground of your standing before God. Rest in that.

If you have never placed your faith in Christ, what we have described today is what is available to you.

Not a religion of moral self-improvement. Not a system of earning divine favor. But a declaration that is freely given, fully secured... that you can be made right with God through faith in Christ alone.

We will say more about how that faith is exercised next week, when we look at Part 4: Faith, Repentance, and the New Birth.

We look forward to seeing you then. Bring your questions and bring you friends with questions.

Until then, let's pray.