

## The Justifier

Romans 3:21-26

*[Preached again 1/4/26]*

### **Intro: A Very Important Passage**

To kick off the new year, I wanted to take us to a passage that, I hope, might root us, once again, in what is of first importance: the gospel. We are a people of the gospel—the good news of the salvation won for us through Jesus. That's what's most fundamental about who we are.

And yet, we can often forget that. DA Carson said, the way churches lose the gospel happens overtime. The first generation preaches it. The second generation assumes it. The third generation distorts it. And the last generation loses it all together.

I never want to assume the gospel at KABC. I want it part of every aspect of the life of this body. I want it as the main theme of every worship service. I want it filling our prayers, songs, teachings. I want us to be reminded of it at the Lord's table and in baptisms. I want it to fill our conversations throughout the week. I want it talked about in small groups and

discipleship groups, over coffee and over lunch, on walks and over the phone. I want us to be sharing it with our friends and family and co-workers and neighbors and the car salesman and the cashier and the barista and the waitress.

I want the gospel to infiltrate every aspect of this church until Jesus returns. That's why I wanna kick off 2026 with a passage the is explicitly about the gospel. There are no words to describe how important this passage is. One person said it could "possibly [be] the most important single paragraph ever written." (Leon Morris, 173; quoted in Stott, 109)

It is a passage that presents us with THE solution to our greatest problem: sin. Every single person a sinner who deserves punishment from God. If we're honest with ourselves, in our secret and quiet moments, we feel the weightiness of our wrongdoing before God. So, what do we do with the guilt, with the shame...When we do things we know we shouldn't do behind closed doors? When we blow up at our kids? When we browse at impure things on the internet? When we try to change again and again but keep failing and we never measure up?

What do we do with our consciences that burn against us for breaking God's law again and again? Not to mention, the cataclysmic problem that faces us—namely, the wrath of God that will be unleashed on us if our sin problem isn't taken care of. Forget feelings of shame/guilt, we gotta face the judgment of a just God.

### **The Just Justifying Judge**

The reason why this passage is so important is because it solves the dilemma of how a holy and just God does NOT give sinners what they deserve, but instead, give them grace. *He provides a way for sinners to be justified before him, and yet, he remains just.* That's the point.

We're only gonna look at the first part of that point; namely, "God provides a way to justify sinners." You can go on our website to find a sermon on the second part, that is: "God remains just when he justifies sinners." So, let's consider **six elements** of God's plan to justify sinners. And my prayer is that yourt hear will be reignited by the glory and wonder and beauty and awesome reality of the gospel.

***Element #1: God's righteousness is GIVEN [v21a, “But now”]*** That's language of *fulfillment*—the climax of the plan of God. “BUT NOW.” This is an indication that something has changed in the course of the history of the world. Something new is here. The unfolding of God's plan for history has reached its climax. How? **[v21a-b, “the righteousness of God...manifested”]**

That's the change/fulfillment/climax. God's righteousness has been manifested/ shown/revealed. This righteousness/ perfection of God is *manifested*. What does that mean? Do you think Paul merely means: “God's perfection is NOW seen? His goodness/ righteousness wasn't really seen BEFORE, but now it is?”

I don't think that's what it means, because of what he goes onto say. **[v21]** “The law/prophets (OT) bear *witness/show/point to/allow us to see* the righteousness of God in some way. *But now* the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from that!” If what Paul means by “manifested” is merely “shown,” then sentence wouldn't make sense. “Now the righteousness of

God is SHOWN apart from the law, but the law and the prophets SHOWED it.”

Paul spent the last few chapters talking about the inability of God’s law (think the Ten Commandments—like, “thou shall not murder, lie, steal, covet, etc”)...the inability of those rules to make us right with God—to give us the righteousness we need. We can’t keep the law. We fail again and again. The law shows God’s righteousness, but it also shows our failing.

That’s why he now says, “Righteousness is *manifested* APART from the law.” *Manifested* has to mean something more than *shown* because something’s changed! It was shown in the law, but now it’s manifested *apart from* the law. Something’s different.

The word *manifested* seems to include the idea of GIVEN. If right standing with God CANNOT be given through keeping God’s law, then GOD must GIVE it. That’s what’s changed. That’s what’s new. Notice how he puts it in **[v22, “FOR all who believe”]**

Do you hear it? God's righteousness FOR whom? It is FOR those who believe. And if it's FOR them ...that means, it's something he *gives*. AND it's called "the righteousness OF God," which can be translation, "the righteousness FROM God." So the point is: Righteousness does not come FROM the law, it comes FROM GOD because HE GIVES it, which means, it's outside of us; it's separate from us. It's not ours; it's his credited to us!

We gotta get this! This is not merely saying, "You have been pardoned/forgiven of your law-breaking/ sin." That's true! I love to talk about how God forgives—FULLY! *If you think of your sin in terms of a massive debt, and God forgives you of that debt, he just wipes away...what an amazing reality!*

But that's not enough. We need more than a debt wiped clean and a blank slate. We need something credited to our empty bank account. You may no longer be in the negative, but that doesn't mean you're in the positive. To be justified means you have been given a new, positive balance of God's righteousness!

Here's how one person said it, "The voice [of] forgiveness ...say[s]: 'You may go; you have been let off the penalty which your sin deserves.' But the [voice of justification] ...say[s]: 'You may come; you are welcome to all my love and my presence.'" (Loane, 94; quote in Stott, 110) Do you see why forgiveness is not enough? To be welcomed by the righteous and just God, we must be righteous and just before him, not merely pardoned.

So that's why this first element is so important: In God's plan to make sinners right with him, he **GIVES** his own righteousness to them. How?

***Element #2: God's righteousness is given through FAITH.*** We saw that emphasis in **[v22, "through faith...believe"]** It comes through faith. This means you *don't earn* it; you *receive* it! Do you see how this solves the dilemma of our inability to keep God's law and earn our righteousness through obedience? We cannot attain the standard of righteousness, so we need someone else who is righteous to credit his righteousness to our account. AND we receive that through faith/trust/dependence...in what? Or whom?

***Element #3: The object of our faith is JESUS***

[v22, “faith in Jesus Christ”] He’s the *object* of your faith. That’s very important because it means, right standing with God is not dependent on how strong your faith is—otherwise your faith would be in your faith. Right standing with God is NOT dependent upon how strong your faith is. It’s dependent upon how strong the one is in whom you’re placing your faith.

*Many of you know that Abner and I went to Cuba for a preaching workshop in the spring. At one point in the workshop, I was sitting in one of those plastic chairs. I fully believed this chair could hold me up. Before I knew it, legs snapped and I hit the floor. That chair was not strong enough to hold up my fat self.*

What matter most is what you place your faith in, NOT how strong your faith is. Your faith in itself is not what saves you. The object of your faith determines your salvation. Jesus Christ is a strong savior worthy of our faith.

***Element #4: Justification is a GIFT.*** Now notice, Paul reminds us at the end of v22 and into 23 of

what he's been arguing up to this point: **[vv22b-23]** That's a summary of 1:18-3:20. "There's no difference between Jews and Gentiles when it comes to exemption of judgment for sin. Why? All have sinned and fall short of God's glory."

That reminds us of what he said in 1:23: Sinners "exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." That's what he means to "fall short of the glory of God." It does NOT mean, "We've all tried to reach God, and we just can't quite make it; we just fall short."

No, we've traded God's glory and greatness and honor for idols. We've replaced him as supreme in our lives and exalted stuff he's created—other people, jobs, achievements, possessions, sex, hobbies. That's what sin is—it's valuing/loving other things more than God. BUT...though we've all sinned and trampled on God's glory, Paul says, **[v24a, "gift"]** What does "gift" mean? Does it mean you paid for it? Of course not! By definition a gift NOT something YOU paid for; it's something *someone else* paid for and *freely gave* to you.

*Imagine that. You open a gift for Christmas... those new pair of shoes you've been wanting but you couldn't afford. You pull them out of the box and then **you pat yourself on the back**. That literally makes no sense. It's a gift! You don't feel prideful by receiving a gift. You feel humble.*

*But what if it's a gift you didn't pay for, but you could have. I'm thankful when my kids get me gifts. But there's a kind of humble gratitude that comes when you receive a gift you could never have paid for yourself.*

Paul is saying, “The righteousness that God gives to you, received by faith is a gift of grace that you could NEVER have paid for yourself. That’s why it was freely given! It’s totally free...TO US. But, as you know with any gift, it’s not free to the one who gives it. The free gift of justification came at great cost to God. This leads to...

***Element #5: Justification is Accomplished Through REDEMPTION [v24b]*** Know what “redemption” is? It’s not so much like “a second chance,” like we talk about “redemption stories.” We might watch a movie about a person who

*brings themselves out of hopeless situation (maybe that they got themselves into) and make something of themselves, and we call it a “redemption story.” That’s not how the Bible uses the term *redemption*.*

*“Redemption” is the language of *buying back*. It was used of slaves who had their freedom bought back. It was used in the marketplace to buy stuff. Paul’s point is: “Your justification was accomplished *through* redemption; meaning: You are declared right before God because you’ve been bought by him!”*

Which means, you’re now HIS! You belong to him! You’re not discarded, unwanted child. You’re not a slave in bondage. You’re not even merely dismissed as a criminal who’s been pardoned! No, you’ve been purchased. You’ve been bought. You belong to God. HOW?

“Redemption” means a *payment* was made. What payment? We get a hint in [v24, “**that is in Christ Jesus**”] Redemption/ buying back/ purchasing is IN...it’s CONNECTED to Jesus, in some way. In what way? This leads to...

### ***Element #6: Redemption is Accomplished***

**Through PROPITIATION [v25a]** There's another big word: *propitiation*. Your translation may say *sacrifice of atonement*. But *propitiation* is the accurate translation. What does that mean? It means averting/ absorbing/ taking away wrath. Redemption (bought by God) is accomplished through propitiation (wrath-absorbing). You were bought, and the required payment was to absorb wrath for you.

Whose wrath needed to be absorbed? 1:18, “The wrath of...GOD is revealed from heaven AGAINST all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...” It is GOD’S wrath that needed propitiating! Who propitiated/absorbed God’s wrath? **[v25, “WHOM God put forward”]**

Do you understand the point he’s is making? God put Jesus, his own/eternal Son, FORWARD as a propitiation. But in what sense was Jesus “put forward” to absorb the wrath of God in our place? See the language in **[v25, “by his blood”]**?

You know what that’s talking about! The cross! Our greatest problem is that we deserve the just

wrath of a holy God. BUT God put Jesus forward as the wrath-absorber when he died on the cross. Do you understand what that means now? *God is not angry with you!* To think he is...is to minimize the cross. If you think God still has an ounce of anger towards to for what you did this past week, for all the ways you failed and fell short, for your impure thoughts and motives, for hypocritical actions...If God is even slightly angry with you in a punitive way, that means the cross wasn't enough.

Oh, but it was! Justification comes through redemption which comes through propitiation which came at the cross. That's why it's free to US. There is NO payment WE are required to make to gain right standing with God because God already made the payment—and the payment was Jesus.

Your job is simply to receive the payment/gift. See that in **[v25, “received by faith”]** It really is that simple. This is the beauty of the gospel. You can, right now, without lifting a finger, be declared righteous before the God of the universe. **[Appeal to non-Christian]**

## Conclusion: Right Standing Never Changes

This means that, IF you are trusting in the free gift of the *redemptive* and *propitiatory* work of Christ that justifies you before God, THEN you *will never be more right with God than you are now, not even in heaven.*

Now, of course, in heaven, the *presence* of sin will be entirely eradicated, but regarding right standing with God, you will never be on BETTER terms with him than you are right now. You will never be MORE accepted by him or acceptable to him than you are right now! Because when God looks at you—covered in the righteousness of Jesus—he says, “That’s my Son! I see my Son!”

Oh, that we would live by this truth! Do you realize how often we live as if we’re not justified before God? We feel like somedays we are more acceptable to God than other days.

Listen to this fictitious (but all-too real) illustration that DA Carson gives to demonstrate how easily we forget the gospel. Here’s what he says: “*Do you ever have a day that runs something like this? You get up in the morning;*

*[it's] drizzly and hot, and the air conditioner is broken. You reach for a clean, fresh pair of socks, and you can't find two that match. You stub your toe on [the] nail sticking out of the wall that you knew you should['ve] fixed...three years ago. You cut yourself while you['re] shaving. You stumble down to breakfast, and that day your wife is going out for a special meeting with her friends and [hasn't] done anything. You go out to the car, put your key in the ignition, and it [won't] start...You get to work late, and people are saying rude things about you. Then your boss says, 'Have you finished that report yet? You're staying late tonight if you haven't.' The whole day unfolds in one endless set of mini-irritants.*

*"...Eventually you return home, and your wife has cooked this disgusting stew that your children like [but] you detest. You [can't] be civil to her, and she [can't] be civil to you. The kids...are [mis]behaving....Your wife wants you to do jobs, and you [just wanna] watch football.*

*Finally [it's] time for bed at the end of this long day, and your [bedtime] prayer runs something like this: 'Dear God, this has been a rotten day.*

*I'm not very proud of myself; I'm frankly ashamed. But I really don't have anything to say. I'm sorry [I've] not done better. In Jesus' name. Amen.'*

*"[BUT] then a few days later you wake up to find the air is refreshingly cool. The sun is shining, the windows are open, the fresh air is wafting through the screen, and you hear the birds singing. You smell something delightful: 'Bacon! I can't believe it! I wonder what the celebration is.' You get up and reach for clean socks and feel full of energy. You're whistling as you wash in the bathroom... You eat a hearty breakfast and then go out to your car, put the key in the ignition, and VROOM!—the car starts right up and takes off. You get to work early. Everybody commends your industriousness and intelligence in the way you discharge your duties. Your boss says, 'Wonderful to see you today! Did I tell you that [you're gonna] get a raise? You did such a great job on that contract.'*

*[When] you arrive home...there is a joyous family dinner. The kids are behaving, and you have an*

*intimate conversation with your wife while the two of you clean up the kitchen.*

*[And] Finally, at the end of [THIS] day you get down to pray, and your prayer goes something like this: "Eternal...matchless God, we bow in your glorious presence with brokenness and gratitude. We bless you that in your infinite mercies and great grace you have poured favor upon us. We are not worthy of the least of your mercies...' And now you go on and on and on in [embellished] theological language. You thank God for all the things in the day, and then you pray for missionaries and their children and first cousins twice removed. Then you start praying for everyone you can think of in your church, and then you meditate on all the names of Christ you can think of in Scripture. And hour goes by, and you go to bed and instantly fall asleep. Indeed, you go to sleep [feeling] justified."*

And Carson says: "How dare [we] approach the mercy-seat of God on the basis of what kind of day [we] had, as if that were the basis for our entrance into the presence of the sovereign and holy God?...This is works theology. It has nothing

*to do with grace and the exclusive sufficiency of Christ. Nothing. ...we overcome our consciences, we overcome our bad tempers, we overcome our defeats, we overcome our lusts, we overcome our fears, we overcome our pettiness on the basis of the blood of the Lamb.” (DA Carson, *Scandalous*, 101-103)*

Get it? We never, ever move on from the gospel. It is the foundation, the heartbeat, the engine of our church and of our lives.

So lemme give you a quick summary so it's not assumed. **[God, man, Christ, response].**

That's the gospel. Let us keep clinging to it in 2026 AND until Jesus returns.