

Sunday, April 26, 2026

## When in Romans part 10

### Justified Freely: The Heart of the Gospel in Romans 3

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#### Sermon Summary

This sermon explores Romans 3:23-31, which Martin Luther identified as the central passage of both Romans and the entire Bible. The pastor unpacks the complex theological concept of justification by faith alone, explaining how God publicly displayed Jesus at the cross as the "mercy seat" where all sin—past, present, and future—was atoned for. The sermon emphasizes that salvation requires no human work or merit; it is entirely accomplished through Christ's sacrifice. God's righteousness and justice are demonstrated at the cross, where Jesus satisfied God's wrath against sin. This leaves no room for human boasting or judgment of others. The message concludes with a call to rest in Christ's finished work rather than exhausting ourselves trying to earn God's favor through our own efforts.

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#### Key Points

- All people have sinned and fall short of God's glory, with no distinction between Jew and Gentile
- Justification comes freely by God's grace through faith alone, requiring no human work or merit
- Jesus is presented as the "mercy seat" (or propitiation), the place where God's wrath against sin was satisfied
- The cross was a public display of God dealing with sin, not sweeping it under the rug
- Jesus' sacrifice paid for all sins—those committed before the cross (in God's forbearance) and those after
- God is both just (in punishing sin) and the justifier (of those who have faith in Jesus)

- Both Jesus' faithfulness and our faith in Him are essential to justification
- There is no room for boasting in salvation since we contributed nothing to it
- Where boasting exists, judgment of others follows—both must be eliminated
- The moral law (summarized as loving God and loving others) is upheld, not nullified, by faith
- Our identity is found in being declared righteous through Christ, not through our works

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## **Scripture References**

### **Explicitly Referenced Scriptures:**

- Romans 3:23-31 - Main passage of the sermon
- Romans 2 - Referenced for context about Jews and the law
- Romans 3:1 - Advantages of being a Jew
- Romans 3:20 - Context about faith in Jesus
- Psalm 14 - Quoted regarding "there is no one righteous"
- Exodus 25:10-22 - The mercy seat and Ark of the Covenant
- Hebrews 9 - The sacrificial system and mercy seat
- Hebrews 11 - Faith definition ("being sure of what we hope for")

### **Specific Verses Discussed in Detail:**

- Genesis 3 - The fall and entrance of sin into the world
- Genesis 4 - Cain's murder (first murder mentioned)
- 2 Samuel 11-12 - King David's sin
- Leviticus 16 - Day of Atonement and scapegoat ritual
- Deuteronomy 28 - Blessings and curses based on obedience
- Matthew 22:37-40 / Mark 12:30-31 - The greatest commandments (love God and love neighbor)
- James 4:6 / 1 Peter 5:5 - "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble"
- 1 Corinthians 1:31 / 2 Corinthians 10:17 - Boasting only in the Lord
- Psalm 119:105 - "Lamp unto our feet, light for our way"

## **Thematic References:**

- John 1:29 - Jesus as the Lamb of God (related to sacrificial system discussion)
- Ephesians 2:8-9 - Salvation by grace through faith, not works
- Colossians 2:13-14 - Canceling the debt of sin
- Romans 5:8 - Christ died for us while we were still sinners

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## **Discussion Questions**

- Paul emphasizes that justification comes through faith alone, with no human work required. How does this truth challenge our natural tendency to earn God's approval through our own efforts?
- The sermon describes God's public display of Jesus on the cross as His way of dealing with sin openly rather than sweeping it under the rug. Why is the public nature of Christ's sacrifice significant for our understanding of God's character?
- In Romans 3:25-26, Paul explains that God demonstrated His righteousness by passing over sins in the Old Testament until they were fully paid for at the cross. How does this understanding of God's forbearance and justice deepen your appreciation for the cross?
- The pastor mentions that we often bring a mental scorecard to church, ranking ourselves and others by sin or good deeds. What practical steps can we take to abandon this judgmental mindset and embrace the truth that we are all equally justified in Christ?
- The sermon presents two interpretations of the end of verse 26: humans having faith in Jesus versus Jesus' faithfulness justifying us. How does recognizing that both truths are essential change your perspective on salvation?
- Paul asks where boasting is in light of the gospel, and answers that it is excluded. In what areas of your spiritual life are you most tempted to boast, and how does this passage call you to humility?

- The mercy seat in the Old Testament required annual sacrifices for sin, but Jesus became the final mercy seat through His own blood. How does understanding this Old Testament background enrich your view of what Christ accomplished?
- The pastor describes reaching a place of spiritual exhaustion from trying to relate to God through works rather than resting in Christ's finished work. What signs indicate you might be falling into this trap, and how can you return to grace?
- Romans 3:31 says that faith does not nullify the law but upholds it. How do we honor the moral law summarized in loving God and loving others without falling back into a works-based relationship with God?
- The sermon identifies despair, hope, wonder, humility, and assurance as possible responses to this passage. Which of these resonates most with where you are spiritually right now, and what does that reveal about your current understanding of the gospel?

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## **5-Day Devotional: Resting in God's Righteousness**

### **Day 1: All Have Sinned**

#### **Reading: Romans 3:23-24; Psalm 14:1-3**

**Devotional:** The weight of these words should stop us in our tracks: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There are no exceptions, no loopholes, no achievements that exempt us. This truth levels the playing field completely—the religious and irreligious, the moral and immoral, all stand equally guilty before a holy God. Yet verse 24 immediately offers hope: we "are justified freely by his grace." Notice the word "freely"—there's no payment plan, no earning system, no spiritual résumé required. God's grace costs us nothing because it cost Jesus everything. Today, resist the temptation to compare your sin to others'. Instead, embrace the humbling truth that you need Jesus just as desperately as anyone else, and rejoice that His grace is sufficient.

**Reflection:** What areas of your life reveal your need for God's grace today?

## **Day 2: The Mercy Seat**

**Reading: Romans 3:25-26; Hebrews 9:1-14**

**Devotional:** In the Old Testament, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year, trembling, to sprinkle sacrificial blood on the mercy seat—the place where God's presence dwelt and where atonement was made. This happened year after year because the sacrifice was never complete. But Jesus became both the perfect high priest and the final mercy seat. He didn't carry the blood of animals; He offered His own blood, once for all time. God's justice demanded payment for sin, and His mercy provided it through Christ. At the cross, justice and mercy kissed. God demonstrated His righteousness by not sweeping sin under the rug but dealing with it publicly and completely. You have access to God's presence not because you're worthy, but because Jesus made you worthy.

**Reflection:** How does understanding Jesus as your mercy seat change how you approach God?

## **Day 3: Faith, Not Works**

**Reading: Romans 3:27-28; Ephesians 2:8-9**

**Devotional:** "Where then is boasting?" Paul asks pointedly. If salvation depended even partially on our efforts, we'd constantly be comparing, competing, and congratulating ourselves. But faith excludes all boasting because it acknowledges we bring nothing to the table. Faith is not moral laziness—it's active trust and daily dependence on Christ. It's the opposite of self-rescue. When you wake up exhausted from trying to earn God's approval through spiritual disciplines, good deeds, or religious performance, remember: you relate to God through Christ's work, not your own. Your identity is "righteous in Christ," not "trying really hard." This doesn't mean obedience doesn't matter; it means obedience flows from gratitude, not desperation. Rest today in the finished work of Jesus.

**Reflection:** Are you trying to earn God's love, or are you resting in what Christ has already accomplished?

## **Day 4: One God, One Way**

**Reading: Romans 3:29-30; John 14:6**

**Devotional:** Paul makes a crucial point: God is not the God of one ethnic group, one social class, or one type of person. He is God of all, and He justifies all the same way—through faith. There's no Jewish entrance and Gentile entrance into God's kingdom, no special access for the religious elite. The ground at the cross is level. This truth should eliminate both pride and prejudice in the church. We cannot look down on others whose backgrounds differ from ours, whose sins look different, or whose journey to faith took a different path. We all came broken. We were all made whole by the same Savior. Today, consider whether you've created categories in your mind of "better" or "worse" Christians. Remember that God's love doesn't rank us—it rescues us.

**Reflection:** Who have you been judging, and how can you extend the same grace God showed you?

## **Day 5: Upholding the Law Through Faith**

**Reading: Romans 3:31; Matthew 22:37-40**

**Devotional:** Does salvation by faith make God's law irrelevant? Absolutely not! The moral law—summarized by Jesus as loving God completely and loving others genuinely—remains our calling. But here's the difference: we no longer obey to earn salvation; we obey because we've been saved. The law reveals God's character and shows us what love looks like in action. It points us to our need for Christ and then guides us in living like Christ. When you feel spiritually exhausted, check your motivation. Are you serving out of fear or freedom? Obligation or gratitude? The Christian life isn't about trying harder to be good enough—it's about abiding in Christ and allowing His life to flow through you. Rest in His righteousness today, and let obedience be your joyful response.

**Reflection:** What would change if you viewed obedience as response rather than requirement?