

THE GIFT WE CAN'T DO WITHOUT (ROMANS 3:21-28)

I was reading about a guy who attended a well-respected Christian conference. The conference was highlighting the latest books about Christian living, so he went around asking people a question and recording their answers. Every one of these Christians should have known the answer to this guy's question, but most did not.

He asked them, "Do you believe that we have to be perfect to enter into heaven?" A few knew the answer, but most stumbled through their reply, saying something like, "No, we don't have to be perfect. Thanks to God's mercy, he doesn't require perfection, or we would never make it!"

In other words, these Christians believe that God is so gracious that his standards have been lowered so we can enter heaven and spend eternity with him. But is that really what the Bible teaches? Is that even logical?

After all, how could an infinitely pure and holy God who passionately hates sin, just look the other way and allow sinful Christians into heaven? And if God was going to just lower His standard and let us into heaven anyway, then why bother with the Cross?

You see, the truth is: God did NOT lower His standard – He *upholds* His standard that only perfection can enter His presence and yet His children are welcomed in. How can both be true?

Paul explains...

Romans 3:21–24; 28 "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 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,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Let's take this passage one verse at a time and learn about the gift that we can't do without – the gift that allows God to maintain His standard of perfection AND provides a way for sinners like us to enter in...

1. We need the gift of God's righteousness.

You see, only God can give us what we desperately need – what we could never achieve – the gift of His own righteousness...

- **A righteousness that we don't possess.** (vs.21a) – It is “the righteousness of God” – a perfect righteousness. Isaiah says *our* righteousness is like a “filthy rag” before a holy God. So, we need God's righteousness which is *outside* of us and *beyond* us.
- **A righteousness that we don't deserve.** (vs.23) – Paul says ALL of us have *fallen short* of God's perfect standard. So, our sin disqualifies us from deserving to go to heaven.
- **A righteousness that we can't earn.** (vs.28) – Paul says this righteousness cannot be earned by doing good deeds, “For we hold that one is justified by faith *apart* from works of the law.” It's a perfection that we cannot earn or achieve no matter how hard we try.

So, the question is: how do we get this righteousness that we do not possess, cannot earn, and do not deserve?

2. We receive this righteousness as a free gift.

Look back at verses 22 and 24...

Romans 3:22; 24 “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe...²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Notice what Paul is saying. The perfect righteousness that we desperately need is...

- **A gift that is found in Christ alone.** Paul is clear that God's perfect righteousness can only be found in Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear that salvation is found in no other name except the name of Jesus (Acts 4:12).
- **A gift that is received by faith alone.** In verse 22, Paul says this gift comes “*through faith* in Jesus for all who believe.”

Philippians 3:9 “And be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that

which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

- **A gift that is given by grace alone.** In verse 24 Paul says we are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

So, this free gift of righteousness is found in Christ alone, received by faith alone, and given by grace alone. But there's one more key aspect that we need to understand...

3. This righteousness requires a great exchange.

If we're going to receive the free gift of God's righteousness so we can spend eternity with God, it requires a great exchange to take place. At this point we need to bring in another verse from Paul which will clarify what he's teaching here in Romans 3...

2 Corinthians 5:21 "For our sake he [the Father] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

So, there's a two-fold transaction that happens when Jesus was on the cross. It's often referred to as the "Great Exchange"...

- **Our sin was placed on the perfect Savior.** When Jesus was on the cross, He was dying for OUR sin, not His own. He was sinless. But on the cross, He was treated as if He were guilty of all the sins ever committed. The one who lived a sinless life died a sinner's death, estranged from God and the object of wrath.¹

Galatians 3:13 "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."

1 Peter 2:24 "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

You see, this is the moment on the cross when the earth grew dark and Jesus cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

¹ Garland, D. E. (1999). *2 Corinthians* (Vol. 29, p. 301). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

He completely understood what was happening, but it broke His heart when the Father had to turn His back on Christ as Jesus took our sin upon Himself...

Isaiah 53:4–6 “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

You see, God is totally Just and perfect, so He couldn't just “forgive” our sins without the *penalty* for those sins being paid and His wrath being satisfied. That's what Jesus was doing on the cross – bearing the just punishment that our sins deserve. ~~In fact, that's what the word “Propitiation” means in Romans 3:25. It describes a two-part act that involves satisfying the wrath of an offended person and being reconciled back to him.~~

And the resurrection was the proof that God accepted Christ's atonement for our sins. The resurrection was like a receipt where the Father was saying, “Paid in Full” or “Perfectly Satisfied,” which is why Jesus said from the cross, “It is Finished.”

By the way, some people call this “cosmic child abuse” – that the Father would kill His own Son on the cross. But that idea implies that Jesus was a victim – dying against His will or unnecessarily. But that's not the way Christ viewed it...

John 10:18 “No one takes [My life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

According to Jesus, the cross wasn't cosmic child abuse. He freely laid down His life and freely took it up again so we could have a Way back to God!

However, our sin being placed on the perfect Savior is only half of the Great Exchange...

- **God's righteousness was placed on the imperfect sinner.** The perfect Savior didn't deserve to bear our sin, and the imperfect sinner doesn't deserve to bear God's righteous. But this is the great exchange that happened on the cross for all those who receive Jesus!

Illustration: Imagine a book called *"The Life and Times of Jesus Christ."* On every page, this book contains all the perfections of Christ – the works He did, His perfect obedience, and His absolute purity.

Then imagine another book called *"The Life and Times of (your name)."* On every page, *this* book contains all of your sinful thoughts and deeds, your broken promises, and all your betrayals of friends. It records every disobedient thought, word, and action that you've ever committed.

Now imagine that Christ takes both books and removes the covers. Then He takes the contents of His own book and slips it between the covers of your book. And he takes the contents of your book and slips it between the covers of His book.

So now, when I pick up the book entitled, *"The Life and Times of Gene DeVaughn"* I turn the pages and there are no sins mentioned. All I see is a long list of perfections, obedience, purity, and perfect love. In fact, this book is so beautiful even God adores it.

This great exchange is known as *justification by faith*. And this is why the guy was asking the question at the Christian conference. He was trying to help Christians understand that God doesn't *lower* His standard of perfection to let us into heaven...

- Jesus *fulfilled* the standard of perfection with His sinless life.
- Jesus then satisfied God's wrath toward our sin on the cross.
- Jesus now provides a way for us to be reconciled with God.

As we wrap up, notice how this gift affects the past, present, and future of the person who is *in Christ*...

- **Past** – When I received Christ, my sins were forgiven, and God now sees me as perfect because I am "in Christ." I'm not just *with* Christ or standing *beside* Christ – I am *in* Christ. So, from now on, when God sees me He sees me "covered" (remember the book) by the perfection of His Son.

- **Present** – Though God already views me as perfect in Christ (positionally), I am not yet without sin in my everyday thoughts and actions (practically). So, each day God is refining me into the perfect image of Christ. I am slowly *becoming* what God has already declared me to be in Christ.
 - **Future** – One day I will see Christ face-to-face in heaven, and I will receive my redeemed body (along with a redeemed perspective and motives), which will no longer be capable of sinning. I will finally *become* what God has already declared me to be!
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Small Groups