



Sermon Transcript October 18, 2020

The Gospel: The Righteousness of God Revealed Romans 3:21-26



This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 18, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 3:21-26

²¹ 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, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Introduction

Are you right with God? This is an important question to ask yourself.

In Romans 2:15, Paul alludes to the fact that our conscience often bears witness against us. He describes the activity of our conscience this way. He says that within us we have *conflicting thoughts* and these *conflicting thoughts* can often *accuse* us. Are you familiar with that internal battle you regularly have over right and wrong? It is not just an internal battle over determining what is right and what is wrong. It is often more about the conflict we feel—call it guilt or call it shame—over the failure to do what is right. If we believe that there is a God who made the world and made us, then we don't just believe that there is a right and a wrong. It goes a couple of steps further. We believe there is an obligation to do what is right and there is an obligation to resist what is wrong and that we are accountable to God.

This is the point Paul has been making in the first three chapters of Romans. His point is simply this: “*None is righteous, no, not one.*” In and of ourselves, there is no one who is “right with God.” There is a general confession of sin in the Common Book of Prayer that goes like this: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” We know this to be true in our conscience. And then it confesses, “and there is no health in us.” And it is even worse than that. D. A. Carson alludes to the fact that knowing the law of God does not enable us to overcome our sin, rather it incites and provokes our sin. He says, “Sin is so rebellious of heart that commands and prohibitions have the same effect a rule does in the mind and heart of an immature teenager.”¹ It is the spirit of the age that says, “rules

were meant to be broken.” So we left last week recognizing that not only are we all *under sin* but all of us also stand condemned in our sin. *It is appointed unto man once to die and then face the judgment.*

This leaves us asking the question, “Is that it then? Are we all destined for death and ruin?” “How can I possibly be made right with God?” If *none is righteous, no not one* then how can I have any hope of being right with God? That is the question Paul answers in the letter he writes to the Romans. At the beginning of our series we saw that the theme or the “thesis statement” for the book of Romans was Romans 1:16-17. It is here we discovered that the gospel is the focus of this letter. The book of Romans is about the gospel. And so in Romans 1:17 Paul says that the gospel is *the righteousness of God revealed*. In other words, the gospel tells us how we can be made right with God. In other words, there is hope for people like you and me.

This hope that we have in the gospel is first conveyed to us through the first two words of our passage this morning. In Romans 3:21, Paul begins with the simple but powerful words, *“But now . . .”* Martin Lloyd-Jones said “there are no more wonderful words in the whole of Scripture than these two words, *“But now . . .”*² I mentioned the last few weeks that **you can’t know what the solution is if you don’t know what the problem is.** The problem is that YOU can’t make yourself right with God. And so, just when you think there is no hope, Paul comes to you with these wonderful words of hope, *“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested . . . it has been revealed.* It a righteousness that comes from outside of us.

This reads like a lot of stories you will find in a normal gospel-centered church like WEFC. “My heart knew no peace and I was always wrestling with my guilt and my shame, *but now . . .*” “I kept making a mess of my life and I wasn’t only destroying my life, but I was destroying the lives of those around me, *but now . . .*” “I was once consumed with anger and bitterness because of the hurts I endured from others, even thinking that God didn’t love me, *but now . . .*” “I always lived in fear and I especially had a fear of dying, *but now . . .*” “I used to be filled with pride, thinking that I could earn the smile of God, but never feeling like I could do enough, *but now . . .”*

Over the next two weeks I want to fill in the blank behind the phrase *but now. But now* what? What is it that changes our lives? It is *the righteousness of God* revealed and received. This morning I want to show you how God **reveals** to us how we can be made right with God. And next week I want to share with you how you can **receive** the *righteousness of God*. May God fill us with more stories that say “*but now . . .”*

The Righteousness of God is Revealed in Christ



The first thing I want you to see from this passage is that the *righteousness of God* is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The phrase *in Jesus Christ* [or some form of it] is a phrase you find three times in this passage. In verse 22 we read about *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ*. In verse 24 Paul talks about the *redemption that is in Christ Jesus*. And then at the end of our passage, verse 26, he refers to the *one who has faith in Jesus*. At the center of the revelation of the *righteousness of God* to us stands the person of Jesus.

If you are asking the question, “How can I be made right with God?” - part of the answer to your question is Jesus. If you want to know how to begin filling in the blank that comes after the phrase *but now . . .* you can start by writing in the name of Jesus. Everyone of those stories is describing the change that Jesus brings to a life. Jesus is able to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Why Jesus? How is Jesus the revelation of God’s righteousness? The answer to this question is found in who Jesus is. He is God in the flesh. When Paul is writing this letter to the Romans, he doesn’t waste any time making this assertion about Jesus. All the way back in his greeting to the Romans, Romans 1:1-4, he zeroes in on who this Jesus is. He begins by saying that this *gospel of God* is centered on Jesus. He said at the beginning of verse 3 that the gospel that he has dedicated his entire life to is *concerning his [God’s] son*. In other words, when he is talking about *the righteousness of God*—the gospel—Jesus Crist is at the center of it.

So here is what Paul says about Jesus. He says that Jesus is *descended from David according to the flesh*. Jesus is born of a woman. We are just a couple months away from celebrating the wonder of this on Christmas. Jesus is fully human. When you do *ancestry.com* with Jesus you can find in his lineage King David, a prominent king in Israel’s history. Not only does this speak to his humanity, but if you know the story of David, you also know that David was told that he would have a descendant, a son, who would reign over God’s kingdom forever. And so by linking Jesus to David, Paul is saying that this “man” who is Jesus is also the Messiah—the Christ—who was promised from long ago. But nonetheless, this Jesus is fully human.

But then Paul makes this second claim about Jesus that distinguishes Jesus from every other human. He is fully God. How could Paul say that? He says in Romans 1:4 that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is what proves it. He said that Jesus *was*

declared to be the Son of God in power . . . by his resurrection from the dead. We will talk about the significance of the resurrection of Jesus in two weeks. But let me just say here, that if Jesus rose from the dead, which is the central claim of Christianity, then he is as Paul confesses at the end of verse 4, *Jesus Christ our Lord*. He is worthy of our worship. Jesus is God in the flesh, the revelation of the righteousness of God.

So how does God reveal the righteousness of God to us through Jesus? Because Jesus was fully God, he was fully obedient to the Father. Jesus was righteous. In contrast to the indictment Paul has levied against all humanity in Romans 3:23, *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*; we would add, “all” but this one. *No one does good . . . but this one—Jesus.* When Jesus was tempted, unlike us, he submitted to the will of the Father. Nowhere was this seen more vividly than when he prayed in the garden before his crucifixion, *not my will, but your be done.* Paul says in Philippians 2 that Jesus was *obedient to death, even death on the cross.* He treated people the way we long for people to be treated. He was often seen embracing those no one else seems to embrace. His servant’s heart is seen in how he gets on his knees and washes the feet of his disciples. While hanging on the cross, he expressed compassion for those who inflicted him with such a painful death, *“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* To a repentant thief nailed to a cross beside him, Jesus was quick to forgive.

When we look at the exemplary life of Jesus, we see in living color what a righteous life looks like. It is a life filled with love and devotion to God the Father. It is a love that is reflected in his obedience. Jesus makes this connection between love and obedience when he says in John 14:15, *“If you love me, keep my commandments.”* Jesus did this and his love for the Father spilled out of his life in his love for others. So if you want to see what *the righteousness of God* looks like—look at the life of Jesus. Jesus lived his life under the good rule of God. He was tempted like we are but was without sin. The *righteousness of God* is revealed to us in the person of Jesus—the perfect Son of God.

The Righteousness of God is Revealed at the Cross



The second place where *the righteousness of God* is revealed to us in this passage is at the cross. We find the cross here in verses 24-25 where we read, *“through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.”* There are some big theological words here that are important to understand: namely *redemption* and *propitiation*. These words add color to our understanding of what it means when we say that Jesus died on the cross for our sin. It is at the cross where God reveals *the righteousness of God*.

Both the words *redemption* and *propitiation* are rooted in the Old Testament. Starting with the word *redemption* we first think of someone who is in debt. Life in the Old Testament was primarily an agrarian culture and you were dependent on a good crop to make ends meet. Growing up in a farming community, I know what that is like. A few bad years—an unwanted drought—could quickly land you deep in debt that could take a long time, sometimes a lifetime, to dig out of. In order to pay that debt, you became a slave to work off your debt. But there was a provision in the Old Testament for someone from your family—a “kinsman redeemer”—who could buy you out of that debt so that you could once again be free. That is the story we read about in the book of Ruth.

That is exactly what Jesus is doing for us on the cross. Romans 6:23 tells us that *the wages of sin is death*. We already saw that we all are *under sin*, enslaved to sin. We have a debt that we cannot pay. But we also have a “kinsman redeemer,” one who is like us and yet is without sin, and therefore is able to redeem us and set us free from the debt we cannot pay. Peter says it this way in 1 Peter 1:18-19. He said that we were ransomed—redeemed—not through *silver or gold*. Money can’t set you free from your sin. Instead, he said that the ransom price that was paid to set us free from the eternal debt of our sin was *the precious blood of Christ*, for he was one *without blemish or spot*.

The second big word in this passage is the word *propitiation*. Paul says that God put Jesus forward *as a propitiation by his blood*. This is a word that takes us back into the Old Testament and it takes us to a piece of furniture in the Old Testament temple. In the temple, there was a room called “the Holy of Holies.” It was the most sacred room of the temple and only the high priest was allowed to go into that room and he could only enter that room once a year. It is a room that represented the throne of God. It is where the ark of the covenant was housed. On the top of the ark of the covenant was what was called “the mercy seat” or “the atonement cover.” It is the word for which we get the word *propitiation*. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) the high priest would take blood from the sacrificial lamb and sprinkle it on top of the mercy seat. God said in Leviticus 16:16 that this was necessary because of the “*transgressions*” and “*sins*” of the people of Israel. This annual sacrifice “satisfied” the anger and the justice of God against their sin.

But in our passage this morning, we find that it is not an animal that satisfies the wrath of God against our sin. Instead, it is the Son of God, Jesus, who is our atoning sacrifice. Through his blood spilled out on the cross, Jesus satisfied God’s anger over our sin and because of Jesus, God extends his mercy and his grace to us. Theologians refer to this as the “penal substitutionary atonement” of Jesus Christ on our behalf. He was our

substitute. He took our place. He took our judgment so that we could be made right with God.

How does the cross reveal to us *the righteousness of God*? Paul gives the answer to this question at the end of our passage in verse 26. On one hand, the cross preserves the fact that God is just. Some people ask, “why can’t God just overlook sin and forgive?” It is because God is just. We saw last week that God’s justice is right. It is a reminder to us that our sin is more than just the breaking of a rule. It is rebellion against God and it destroys God’s creation. But through the cross, God remains just in that he pours out his wrath against our sin by pouring his wrath out on Jesus. And so we hear Jesus cry from the cross, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*” This then allows God to also be *the justifier*. That means that God can make us right with him because he gives to us the righteousness that belongs to Jesus. Look what it says in verse 24, “*and we are justified (declared to be righteous) by his grace as a gift.*” In his infinite love for us, he made a way for us to be made right with God.

The last two weeks I have made much of Carl Sagan’s observation about what he called “the cruelty of man.” Referring to the earth as a “pale blue dot” in comparison to the universe, he lamented over they way man treats each other and he wondered what that meant for the future of this planet. He said, “In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.” We agree, we can’t save ourselves. But help has come! It has come in Jesus! He is the *righteousness of God*, God in the flesh. Through the cross he has set us free from the debt of our sin and took upon himself our judgment so that God’s justice could be satisfied and we could be made right with God.

Conclusion

Do you have a “*But now . . .*” to your story? I began by asking, “Are you right with God?” It is Jesus who makes you right with God. It is at the cross where Jesus makes you right with God. As we will see next week, if you turn to him by faith, God makes you right. He gives to you the righteousness of Jesus. That is what makes us sing! That is was fills us with peace! That is what gives us hope! That is what forms within us a love for God and for others. It is Jesus! It is the cross!

¹D. A. Carson “Sin’s Contemporary Significance” https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/contemporary_carson.html

²Martin Lloyd Jones quoted in Douglas Moo *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 221

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

○ Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is the “*But now . . .*” story of your life? In other words, what difference has Jesus made in your life? Think about how you would share this with someone you are witnessing to.
2. Can you think of a time this week when you were conscious of living as someone who is sent? What was the situation and how did you sense God leading you?

○ Diving Into The Word

3. Read Romans 3:21-26. What are some observations you make from this passage?

Use this passage to think through the following questions . . .

4. If you had a minute in an elevator to explain to someone how we can be right with God, what would you say?
5. At the end of this passage it says that God is both “just” and the “justifier.” Do you tend to forget God’s justice or God’s justification (making us right). How does forgetting one or the other affect your feelings, your outlook, and/or your actions?
6. How has this passage moved you to praise the God who justifies?

○ Taking It Home

7. What is one thing you are taking from your study?
8. As a group develop a prayer list of people you would like to see turn in faith to Jesus. Are there any updates on the people you are praying for to share with the group?