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Romans 3:21-26 “What the Cross Accomplished”

Intro. One of the major themes of the book of Romans is that God is righteous. This is demonstrated by the fact that the word translated “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνην) is found 30 times in the book of Romans. Furthermore, when Paul introduces the main body of this letter, he says in 1:17 that the gospel of Christ reveals “the righteousness of God.” Then in v.21 of our text, Paul affirms, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets¹ bear witness to it.” The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, affirms that God is absolutely righteous and without sin. He always does what is right.

Now here’s the problem we face. God demands righteousness from His creatures, and yet we, without exception, have sinned. In chapters 1-3 Paul has demonstrated that both Jew and Gentile have sinned. He quotes the Old Testament in 3:10 saying, “None is righteous, no, not one.” God is righteous, but we’re not. Then in v.23 of our text he says that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We all, without exception, have sinned against God both by nature and by choice. Though you may think you are a pretty good person compared to others, Paul rightly says that we *all* fall short of God’s glory. That is a reference to the fact that we fall short of His gloriously perfect attributes, including righteousness,² holiness, and goodness. We are not as holy and just as God. We are not as good and loving as God is. As a result, we are all guilty before God, and we all deserve the just sentence of death, for Paul says in 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death....” We deserve both physical death and eternal separation from God.

Deep down in our conscience we come to realize in childhood that we are not right with God, even if we don’t want to admit it. Job asked long ago, “How can a man be just before God” (9:2, NKJV). In the Gospel of Matthew we read about the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. He was concerned that he may not measure up to God’s standard, so he asked Jesus, “What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” (19:16, NKJV). You probably have wondered how *you* can be right with God? Don’t you want to be right with God? If you are married, you want things to be right with your spouse, don’t you? Children and youth, you know if you dishonor or disobey your parents, things will not be right with them! How much more should we want to be right with God, before whom we will stand in judgment! He is the most important person in the universe.

How can this disparity between the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of man be solved? How can we become right with God? It is clear from v.20 of our text that the answer is not to be found in man’s ability to keep the law. If man is going to become right with God, the solution must come from God. So in v.21 Paul begins a new section in Romans with the words, “But now.” Things are different now, for God has intervened to save us from our sin. The answer to the conflict between God’s righteousness and man’s sin is Jesus Christ. With the coming of Christ, the night of sin and death can give way to the dawn of forgiveness, imputed righteousness and eternal life. Though God is righteous and judges sin, through Christ we can see another side of God. He is loving, merciful, and gracious.

¹ The Law reveals sin; the prophets revealed the sin bearer. The law requires penalty; prophecy speaks of the sacrifice to come (McBeth, p.117).

² McBeth even says that in this case the "glory of God" is essentially the same as the “righteousness of God.”

In the Iliad of Homer, there is a story of the great warrior Hector. Before he went to battle, he said farewell to his wife and child. He wanted to embrace his little child, but as he reached out, his fierce armor and helmet so terrified the boy that he cried and buried his head in his mother's shoulder. So Hector took off his armor and *then* reached out for his child. Instantly he jumped into his father's arms and embraced him. [MacArthur, 40-41].

In a sense, up to this point in Romans God is pictured as a God of wrath (1:18), ready to strike with sword of justice. Yet God takes the armor off in Romans 3:21. Now we see Him as a loving Father. This morning I want to show you what God did in Jesus Christ to uphold His righteousness, and yet provide salvation for sinful man. The focus of this drama of redemption is on the cross of Jesus Christ. To Christians, the cross is everything. I want to show you 5 things the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross accomplished to make us right with God. First of all:

I. THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST SATISFIED GOD'S WRATH

Because God is righteous, He is also just. One expression of His justice is wrath and judgment against sin. Paul began the main body of this letter in 1:18 saying, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,...." God's wrath against sin must be satisfied, for God is a God of justice. Since God loves us and does not wish to pour out His wrath against us, Jesus was willing to take upon Himself the wrath of God in our place. We read in v.25, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood...." This is not a word we use in normal conversation, so I feel I must explain what this word (*hilasterion*) means. It mainly refers to something done to satisfy divine wrath.

That word in the original Greek was commonly used in pagan religion. During a storm, or plague, or some other natural disaster, the pagans would assume the gods were angry, and they would offer sacrifice, or afflict themselves with pain to try to propitiate the gods. Propitiation was viewed as something *man* did. However, it is significant that it was God the Father who thus set forth Christ to be a propitiation. This makes the concept entirely different from pagan notions of appeasing the gods. In Christianity the God whose holy nature required the propitiatory sacrifice is Himself the One who provided it! (cf. Lev. 17:11). Thus, Christ did not win over His reluctant Father, persuading Him by His sacrifice to forgive us. His sacrifice made it possible for God to do what He already wanted to do, and that is extend mercy to the sinner by forgiving their sin. A God of love wants to forgive sinners, but a God of holiness must punish sin and uphold His righteous Law. How can God be both "just and the justifier"? The answer is in Jesus Christ.

The Greek word translated "propitiation" (*hilasterion*) was also used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the mercy seat, the covering over the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Heb. 9:5³). The mercy seat covered the Law that had been broken by man. The outraged justice of God cried out for judgment upon the sinners who had broken the law. But God provided that the blood of the sacrifice could be applied to the mercy seat by the High Priest to protect the sinner and hold back the wrath of God. This was done especially on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:30; 23:27-28).⁴

Yet God was never really satisfied with the thousands of animals slain in the Old Testament. The mercy seat with its sacrificial blood only pointed to the true sacrifice at the cross

³ Also, it was so translated in 21 of 27 occurrences in the LXX (Moo, p.129).

⁴ It made perfect sense for Paul to allude to this central item in Israel's atonement ritual, which was very familiar to his Jewish readers.

of Jesus, where He shed His life's blood. Notice in v.25 that the satisfaction of divine wrath against sin was accomplished "by His blood." We must be careful to note that it was not the life which Jesus lived that saves any man, but the life which He poured out in the shedding of His blood which redeems us from our sins. The blood satisfied the justice of God.

You have sinned against a holy God. Has God's wrath against your sin been satisfied? Christ is the only answer to your sin problem. Trust in Christ, and Him alone for your salvation.

Secondly:

II. THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST UPHOLDS GOD'S JUSTICE

There is a comparison and yet a contrast between what took place at the mercy seat, and what took place at Calvary. Notice again that Paul says in v.25, "whom God put forward as a propitiation...." "Put forward" is translated from a Greek word (*protithemai*) which in the papyri frequently meant "set forth publicly." The mercy seat in the Old Testament was concealed, but here the propitiation is *publicly* set forth. Crucifixion was purposely done by the Romans along busy roads. Thus, the crucifixion of Christ was a very public event. There was nothing hidden or secret about it.

The Romans had their purpose for making crucifixion such a public event, but why did God want the sacrifice of Son to be such a public event? One reason it was so public was for the benefit of man. God wants everyone to behold the cross and see what Christ did for you there. He wants the message of the cross to be proclaimed far and wide. Christ shed His blood to make it possible for God's wrath to be satisfied, and forgiveness extended to the sinner. Furthermore, Jesus died to exhibit to the world that sin cannot escape the punishment of God. The cross is also a revelation of how bad sin is.

However, there is another reason why the cross was such a public event. It was not only for the benefit of man, but also for the benefit and glory of God. We often say that Christ died for us but how often do we say that Christ also died for God, for His glory. We read in the last of v.25 that God set forth Christ as a propitiation "... to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins." This shows us that the death of Christ removed an apparent scandal from the name of God. When the saints in the Old Testament sinned, God in His patient forbearance covered or passed over their sin. The animal sacrifices of the tabernacle did not really satisfy God's wrath and bring forgiveness (Heb. 10:4; Psa. 51:16). They just provided a covering for sin, an atonement for sin. God was willing to cover their sin because He knew that the day would come when Jesus would die for the sins of all humanity on the cross. After all, Rev. 13:8 says that Christ was "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (NKJV). Historically, the sins of the redeemed were not punished until the death of Christ. So God wanted to show the world why He was just in passing over the sins of the Old Testament saints.

Years ago, a society for the spread of atheism issued a leaflet that abundantly demonstrates what our text sets forth and answers. The tract contained a half dozen portrait sketches of old men, and gave to those pictures the names of well-known Old Testament characters. The sketches were positively villainous looking, yet they carried the names of such men as Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David.

Below the portraits there were certain Bible statements relating to the lives of these men. Under the face that was supposed to represent Abraham, we read that he was a coward who was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife, Sarah, in order to save his own skin. The Bible

reference is given. He did that twice! He even allowed a king to take Sarah into his harem. Then the atheists point out that elsewhere in the Bible Abraham was called “the friend of God.” Finally, they ask what kind of a God is the God of the Bible, who had such friends as this dishonorable man. They seemed perfectly right in thinking that a holy God could not remain holy and yet fellowship with sin.

Their portrait of Jacob represents a man who is described as a cheat and a liar, with the proper Bible references in support. We are told that God wrestled with Jacob and then changed his name to Israel, which means prince of God. The authors then inquire about the character of a God who would have such a prince, or who would allow Himself to be called “the God of Jacob.” If it can be shown that God chose such men as these without punishing their sin, then our perception of the character of God would be adversely affected. What would men think of an earthly judge who imposed a heavy sentence on one law breaker and then, seemingly for no good reason, let a similar law breaker go free?

The atheists then presented Moses and pointed out that he was a murderer and a fugitive from justice when the Lord appeared to him and sent him back to Egypt as His own representative, calling him His servant, and setting him up as a leader of a great people, and putting into his bloody hands the tables of the law containing the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” For a murderer to preach “Thou shalt not kill” is hypocrisy. What kind of a God would use a murderer for such a message? The atheists said that instead of blessing Moses, God should have punished him.

Another of the characters in the atheists’ leaflet was David. He was particularly repulsive in the drawing. We read of his adultery and of his murder in order to conceal his adultery. Yet we read that David was “a man after God’s own heart.” The atheists asked what kind of a God was this God of the Bible who had a heart that could find anything to praise in David.

Now the remarkable thing about that leaflet is that it made a valid point. God says so Himself. For hundreds of years there appeared to be a stain on the name of God. If we had no New Testament, we would not know the answer. God knew that it was not righteous, or just to simply forgive guilty sinners, yet He went right on doing it for believers throughout all of the period of the Old Testament. [Barnhouse, pp. 134-36].

The answer to this dilemma is found right here in our text. God the Father set forth Christ in death to satisfy His wrath against sin as a proof (Gk. *endeixis*) of His righteousness and justice because of the fact that He had “passed over” (i.e. allowed to go unpunished) the sins that had been committed beforehand during the time of the forbearance of God (cf. Acts 17:30). You see, the sins of the men of the Old Testament were only “covered over” at the time when they committed them. The Hebrew word for “atonement” is *kaphar* and has given the word for “cover” to a dozen languages. When the Lord Jesus died, the sins which had been covered were uncovered, placed upon the Heavenly Lamb, and dealt with by the righteous Judge. This verse, along with the next, lets us know that the propitiatory death of Christ makes possible the justification of the sinner without compromising the moral character of God. God’s mercy can be extended to us with no loss of His justice. Indeed, now we see the full manifestation of the righteousness and justice of God, as Paul says in v.21.

You need to reject this modern notion that God will just overlook sin, sweeping it under the rug. Don’t think for a moment that you can sin, and God will just act like nothing ever happened. He only overlooked sin in the lives of Old Testament believers because He knew the day was coming when Christ would shed His blood on the cross for their sin. Thus, we not only praise God for His love and mercy, but we should also praise Him for His justice!

By the way, now that Christ has died for our sins, God no longer just overlooks or covers sin. Either repent and believe in Christ, or you will surely face the wrath of God.

There is something else that was accomplished at Calvary:

III. THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST MAKES POSSIBLE OUR JUSTIFICATION

Here Paul is using an analogy from a court of law. On the one hand, the law of God condemns us. Yet here we see that God can justify us in His sight. Because God's wrath was satisfied at Calvary, the sinner who believes in Christ can be justified in His sight. We can be acquitted of our sin, for the same sin cannot be judged twice. Paul says in v.22 that we can receive "the righteousness of God through faith in⁵ Jesus Christ." He says in v.24 that we "are justified... through ... Christ." Paul says in v.26 that He is "the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." So this is a righteousness that God provides to make us right with Him based on the sacrifice of Christ. This exchange of our unrighteousness for His righteousness is marvelously summed up in 2 Cor. 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Imagine that! By faith in Christ, you can trade your sin for Christ's righteousness. In the sight of God your sin can be removed and in its place God will see nothing but the righteousness of God. My sin is gone. God's wrath has been satisfied. I now have peace with God, and I know that things are right between me and God.

Have you accepted this wonderful offer that God has for you? Have you been justified in His sight? Do you know for sure things are right between you and God? You can be justified in the sight of God because of what Christ did at Calvary. Justification is an objective reality that defines who we are in Christ, regardless of how you feel on any given day.

What must you do to receive this act of justification? Paul says in the last of v.22 it is "for all who believe. For there is no distinction." The role of faith is also emphasized in vv.25-26. Faith in Christ is the means whereby we appropriate the righteousness of God. Notice also that this righteousness is "for all who believe." Whether Jew or Gentile, regardless of your ethnicity or gender, you should trust in Christ and be made right with God. Why would you continue to hold on to your sin when God is willing to remove it and make things right?

Something else was accomplished at the Cross:

IV. THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST REDEEMS US FROM OUR SIN

Paul is using lots of metaphors in this text to describe what Christ did for us. Here is one more: What Christ did on the cross was an act of redemption.⁶ V.24 says we "are justified ... through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Redemption (*apolutrosis*) has two main ideas included in it:

A. A Price Was Paid - When you redeem an item from a pawn shop, you must pay the redemption price. So here we see that even though this justification is free to us, it cost Christ greatly, more than we can imagine. The wages of sin is death (6:23), and Christ paid that great

⁵ This is translated as an objective genitive but it could be a subjective genitive, i.e. "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." He was faithful to the task God gave Him to do, which made salvation possible (cf. 3:3). However, "faith in Jesus Christ" is probably correct.

⁶ See also Mark 10:45; Luke 24:21; Romans 8:23; 1 Cor. 1:30; Ephesians 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col. 1:14; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18.

price for us. 1 Peter 1:18-19 says, “knowing that you were ransomed ... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.” God would not be just if He forgave sin apart from the penalty of death being paid by the sinner, or by a substitute who was without sin. Jesus was sinless, and He was able to pay the redemption price.⁷

Consider what Christ had to pay for you to be redeemed. Do you respond with gratitude and obedience?

Redemption not only indicates a price paid, but it also indicates:

B. Our Freedom Was Secured - The Greek word for redemption contains the root word *luo* which means “to loose, to set free.”

The Roman Empire had many slaves. If your country was defeated by the Romans, you could be sold into slavery. Or if you could not pay your debts, you could be sold into slavery. The primary way you could gain your freedom is if someone redeemed you by purchasing your freedom. Since slaves were very expensive, it didn't have very often.

Even so, we were chained and enslaved by our sins. In fact, in the last of v.9 Paul says that “both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...,” that is, under the condemnation and control of sin. We stood condemned, but when we trusted in Christ, our sins were loosed from us, having been laid upon Christ at Calvary. Rev. 1:5 says, “To him who loves us and has freed [lit. loosed] us from our sins by his blood.” Jesus was willing to shed His life's blood to redeem you from sin. We are no longer condemned. We are justified and made right with God because Christ paid the penalty of our sin. Not only that, but the sacrifice of Christ makes it possible for us to be set free from the power of sin. The saving work of Christ not only makes it possible for God to *declare* us righteous, but also to make us more and more righteous in our daily walk.

Don't you want to be free from the condemnation of sin? Don't you want to be free from the addictive control of sin? Trust in Christ. He is the One who shed His blood to redeem you from sin.

Finally, there is another grand accomplishment of the cross of Christ:

V. THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST MAGNIFIES GOD'S GRACE

It is clear from our text that salvation is 100% the work of God. There is nothing we can ever do to win the forgiveness of God. In the last of v.26 we see that God set forth Christ to satisfy His wrath and redeem us “so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” He is the One who justifies us. We cannot achieve a right standing with God by keeping the law. Again, Paul says in v.21, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested⁸ apart from the law...” Furthermore, he said in v.20, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...” The Law could witness to God's righteousness, but it could not provide it for sinful man. It can do nothing but thunder: “Thou shalt not sin,” and “The wages of sin is death.” You cannot become right with God by keeping the 10 Commandments, or the other laws of God. You simply can't keep all the commandments of God without failing.

How, then, are we made right with God? Notice in v.24 that we are “justified by his grace as a gift.” It (*dorean*) is translated “as a gift” because that's the root meaning of the word. God

⁷ It would take the details of the analogy too far to speculate to whom God paid the ransom, Himself or Satan?

⁸ Manifested (*πεφανερωται*) is in the perfect tense which refers to a past completed act with abiding results.

wants to *give* you His righteousness. Justification is free to us and without merit. Our justification does not have its roots in us; if it did we would always be in constant doubt as to whether we had properly fulfilled the requirements.

The fact that our justification has nothing to do with our merits is further declared by the words, “by His grace,” and the word “His” is in the emphatic position. Grace is a favor done out of spontaneous generosity of the heart without any expectation of return. The action of justification on God’s part derives its whole motivation, explanation, and determination from what God Himself is and does in the exercise of free and sovereign grace.

In the days of the great evangelist D. L. Moody, there was a minister named Harry Morehouse who often helped Moody in his campaigns. One morning he was walking along the street in a poor part of one of our great cities and witnessed a minor tragedy. A small boy, who could not have been more than five or six years of age, came out of a store with a pitcher of milk in his hands. The little fellow was making his way carefully along the street when he slipped and fell. The pitcher broke and the milk ran all over the sidewalk. He let out a wail, and Harry Morehouse rushed to see if he were hurt. There was no physical damage but he would not be consoled, crying out over and over, “My mama’ll whip me! My mama’ll whip me.”

Mr. Morehouse said to him, “Maybe the pitcher is not broken in too many pieces; let us see if we can put it together again.” The boy stopped crying as he watched Mr. Morehouse place the base of the pitcher on the sidewalk and start building up the pieces. Twice the pieces fell apart. At each failure the boy started crying again, but was silenced by the big preacher who was helping him so much. Finally, the entire pitcher was reconstructed from the pieces, and it stood there in perfect shape on the sidewalk. The little fellow picked it up to take it to the place where it belonged, and, of course, the whole thing fell apart once more. This time there was no stopping his tears, and it was then that Mr. Morehouse gathered the boy in his arms and walked down the street with him to a nearby ceramic store. He entered with the lad and bought a new pitcher. Then he went back to the milk store, had the pitcher washed and filled with milk. Carrying the boy on one arm and the pitcher of milk in the other hand, he followed the boy’s instructions until they arrived at his home. Very gently he deposited the lad on his front steps, carefully put the pitcher in his hands and then said to him, “Now will your mama whip you?” A smile broke on the boy’s streaked face, and he answered, “Aw, no sir! ‘cause it’s a lot better pitcher than we had before.” [Barnhouse, pp. 98-99].

What that man did for the boy was totally an act of grace, doing for him what he could not do for himself. Even so, God did for us what we could not do for ourselves, and we have obtained a priceless gift in Christ that is far better than anything we could have obtained. Christ has removed God’s wrath, and replaced it with pardon for sin, true righteousness and eternal life.

Conclusion: If you knew you were about to die, and that you were closing your eyes for the last time, do you know that things are right between you and God? Do you know that God would find you acceptable in His sight? If you do not have peace with God, I invite you to put your trust in Jesus Christ. He is the One who died on the cross for your sin. He is the One who can give you righteousness in the sight of God. All that is required of sinful man is that he should embrace by faith what God’s grace has provided. You can be justified freely by His grace. It is a gift you must receive by faith. Will you receive that gift today? Will you trust in what Christ did for you at Calvary?

As for those of us who have already been justified, I urge you to reflect on what Christ has done for you: He satisfied God’s wrath that you deserve with His own suffering and death.

He has made you right with God. He has redeemed you, setting you free from the condemnation and power of God. All these blessing were freely given by His grace. Will you thank and praise God today? Will you respond by fully living for Him in obedience and service?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); John Macarthur, Jr., *Justified by Faith: Study Notes on Romans 3:20-4:25* (Panaroma City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

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