

Romans | The Gift of Righteousness (part 1 of 5)

Saved by Grace: The Beauty of a Just and Justifying God

Romans 3:21-26

Mark Vroegop

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 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. 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.” (Romans 3:21–26, ESV)

For as long as I can remember, I have been a morning person. I’m sure that there are some of you who can resonate with that orientation, and there are others who, frankly, despise those of us who are glad to be alive first thing in the morning. I have very little use for the dark, and I’ve never – not even once – pulled an all-nighter. I am an “all-dayer.”

To me there is something exhilarating and refreshing as the gloomy, cold darkness makes its gradual turn to daylight. I think sunsets are nice, but I think sunrises are stunning. I view the morning as something that is hopeful, optimistic, and illuminating. I just have and probably always will love the mornings.

The Dawn of Grace

When I read Romans 3:21-26, I cannot help but feel like morning has finally arrived. Call me sappy, but I could not shake the image of a sunrise as I read this text for the first or for the fifth time. It seems like the warm glow of God’s grace finally begins to shine here after a long, dark, and gloomy section of Scripture.

For the last seven weeks, we have seen Paul’s diagnosis of the human condition, and it has not been pretty. From Romans 1:18-3:20, the central message has been that “no one is righteous, no, no one” (Rom. 3:10b). And while it has been helpful, I am ready for the warm, radiant heat of what comes in the remaining verses of chapter three and in all of chapter four.

The theme of Romans is righteousness, and our next section is entitled “The Gift of Righteousness.” For the next five Sundays, ending on Easter, we will make our way through the beautiful solution that God offers to our ruined human condition. We begin to see the grace of God dawn, and it is really beautiful. In light of what we have already studied, it is stunning.

Our text today is probably the thematic center for the entire book of Romans. Martin Luther took that even further, saying that this passage was the central text for the entire New Testament. He is probably right because what we have here is one of the best descriptions of what God's grace is all about.

Paul strings together phrase after phrase in order to captivate us with two things: 1) the beauty of God's grace, and 2) the beauty of God Himself. Or you could think of it this way: **The dawning of the beauty of God's grace leads us to the beauty of God Himself.**

It is important to keep in mind, as we study Romans, that this book is not just about righteousness. It is about the righteousness of God. A right appreciation and affection for grace will lead you to where Paul ended the doctrinal section in Romans:

*"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen."
(Romans 11:36).*

Through the dawn of God's grace, we behold the beauty of God.

The Beauty of Grace

Verse 21 constitutes a major shift in message from what was previously written, and it is highlighted by the phrase "but now." This term means that Paul is changing themes ("but") and that the solution to the previous issue is not in the future; it has already come ("now"). Hope is not just being offered in the future. Hope has dawned. Morning has come!

Paul links the beauty of grace to what he has said before with the rest of verse 21:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—" (Romans 3:21, ESV)

Essentially Paul is reminding us that righteousness does not come from works ("apart from the law") and that this message is not a departure from the teaching of the Old Testament. Paul's aim is not to discredit the Law or the entire Old Testament. Rather, he will show over the next eight chapters how the message of "the righteous shall live by faith" (1:17) is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. So this message is new in respect to the previous theme in Romans, but it is not a new message in terms of the entire Bible.

What follows in verses 22-25 is a string of phrases that all provide a dynamic angle on the righteousness of God that comes to sinful, undeserving human beings. Each of them is a facet of the beauty of God's grace.

1. "Through Faith"

This first phrase is incredibly important because the main point of this text is that the righteousness of God does not come by works but by faith. We were introduced to this idea in 1:17 when Paul said *"the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith."* Faith is beginning, the end and the goal of the gospel, and this is the first time since 1:17 that the word "faith" appears.

So this string of phrases begins with faith, but I find it very interesting that it also ends with faith. Look at verse 25. We will unpack this phrase, but just notice that this list ends with the phrase “to be received by faith.” What’s more, the description of God as just and justifier also ends with the statement – “*the one who has faith in Jesus*” (3:26). Faith, as opposed to works, is the centerpiece of Paul’s argument about the gospel.

The phrase “through faith” introduces the critical truth that the righteousness of God comes by means of, because of, or through the activity of faith. What is faith? It is to believe, to place one’s complete trust in, to rely upon, or to have confidence in something. Now the rest of this list will help us understand more fully what this means. At this point you just need to note that the righteousness does not come from works; it comes through faith.

2. “In Christ”

This second phrase is just as important as “through faith” because people are not just saved through faith; they are saved through faith “in Christ.” A person does not just “trust” or “rely” or “have confidence” alone. Those words must have an object. You trust “in” something. Or you rely “upon” something. So “through faith” has to be connected to “in Christ” or it has no meaning or significance. You could think of the difference between works and faith as the difference between putting faith in your ability to earn God’s favor versus putting faith in Christ’s ability to make you favorable to God. “Through faith” and “in Christ” are vitally linked, which is why the Reformers said, “Faith alone in Christ alone.”

To put one’s faith “in Christ” means that you have turned away from trusting yourself and what you do to trusting in who Christ is and in what He did. It means looking to His work for you, seeing His death as your death, and embracing His life as your life. And it means that everything about who you are is shaped by being “in Christ.” Salvation comes to those who turn from trusting themselves to trusting Christ. That is why it is “through faith in Christ.”

3. “For all who believe”

If “through faith” was the means, if “in Christ” is the object, then “for all who believe” is the scope. The words faith and believe are virtually synonyms. The Bible uses them interchangeably. Let me give you two examples:

*“And to the one who does not work but **believes** in him who justifies the ungodly, his **faith** is counted as righteousness,” (Romans 4:5, ESV)*

*“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through **faith** in Jesus Christ, so we also have **believed** in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16, ESV)*

But the other point of this phrase is the word “all.” Paul has gone to great lengths to explain the common need of Jews and Gentiles. That is why he says: “*For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory*” (3:22b-23). The common problem of sin that we all share is remedied by the offering of forgiveness, and it does not matter who the person is or what he have done. Anyone who believes and puts his or her faith in Jesus can be saved.

Isn't that what makes church so beautiful? It is a stunning thing that we come from different backgrounds, ethnicities, languages, and cultures and that our common connection is belief in Jesus. We are all sinners, and we all need a savior. The beauty of grace is that Christ is sufficient for **all** who believe.

4. "And are justified"

Verse 24 has one of the most important words in the Bible: justified. The word means to cause someone to be in a right relation with someone else. The Greek word for justified (*dikaionomenoi*) is closely related to the word for righteousness (*dikaiosyne*), and it is a legal term for a declaration of righteousness – a declaration of possessing God's righteousness. To be justified means that God, through the work of Christ, declares people to be in a right relationship with Him. This is the first of three metaphors that Paul will use. "In the first, God takes the part of the judge who acquits the prisoner; in the second, that of the benefactor who secures freedom for the slave; in the third, that of the priest who makes expiation."¹ To be justified means that a holy, righteous, and all-knowing God has declared you to be not-guilty.

5. "By his grace as a gift"

The beauty of justification is that this declaration of forgiveness comes "by his grace as a gift." The mantra of the Reformation was "Faith alone through Christ alone by grace alone." The righteousness that God provides does not come from human merit or work. That is why Paul uses both "grace" and "gift" to describe justification. Justification cannot be purchased or earned by us, and God does this so that the beauty of grace and God are the focal points in salvation and not us. The plan of salvation is meant to say something incredible about God.

6. "Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"

Paul next uses the familiar concept of purchase for the purpose of redemption. This idea has a history going back to the days of Exodus, when God liberated His people from their bondage to the Egyptians. As Paul will more fully unpack in Romans 6, humanity is under the slavery of sin, and the gospel transfers us from being slaves to sin to being slaves of righteousness (see Romans 6:22).

The Greek word was used for the buying back of prisoners of war, slaves, and condemned criminals by the payment of a ransom.² And what was the ransom? In God's plan of redemption, it was the personal sacrifice of Christ – thus "that is in Christ." Jesus redeemed those who trust in him by becoming their ransom.

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

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995).

² *Ibid.*

7. “Whom God put forward as a propitiation”

I am sure you do not use the word propitiation very often in your daily conversation, and yet it is a vitally important biblical concept and word. This is the third metaphor (previously: court, slave market), and it has a religious context. The word “propitiation” means the restoration of the relationship between God and human beings through atonement. It is the appeasing of God’s wrath against sin.

But what is amazing about this passage is the fact that the text says “...whom God put forward as a propitiation . . .” It is remarkable that it is God who makes the appeasement of His wrath possible. No one has described the beauty of this better than D. A. Carson in his book *Scandalous*. Here is what he said:

*In Christian propitiation, God the Father sets forth Jesus as the propitiation to make himself propitious; God is both the subject and the object of propitiation. God is the one who provides the sacrifice precisely as a way of turning aside his own wrath. God the Father is thus the propitiator and the propitiated, and God the Son is the propitiation.*³

8. “By his blood”

The propitiation that God put forward was nothing less than the physical death of His own son. The phrase “by his blood” connects two very important realities in God’s plan for redemption: 1) It connects the sacrifice of Jesus to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament – “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*” (Hebrews 9:22), and 2) It connects the personal and human sacrifice of Jesus to the sacrificial system – “*he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*” (Hebrews 9:12, ESV) It is the blood of Jesus that makes propitiation possible. The death of Jesus appeased the wrath of God on sin.

9. “To be received”

We are coming to the end of our list, but Paul wants to make sure that he reemphasizes again the nature of our actions versus God’s. In order for grace to be beautiful, it needs to depend on God. Therefore, Paul uses “receive.” Previously he used words like faith, believe, grace, and gift. But he adds yet another word here to be sure that we get the point that God’s grace is not something to be earned; it is only received as a gift.

10. “By faith”

This is where we started and this is where Paul ends his list of phrases regarding the beauty of God’s grace – with faith. Hopefully you remember why: because faith is the antithesis to works. The beauty of the gospel and the essence of the Good News is that forgiveness comes to those who put their faith in Jesus, who trust in Him for their righteousness, and who receive God’s cleansing by faith. It is a righteousness through faith in Christ and an appeasing of wrath to be received by faith.

³ D. A. Carson, *Scandalous – The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2010), 64-65.

The beauty of God's grace to us is that it is: "through faith," "in Christ," "for all who believe," "and are justified," "by his grace as a gift," "through redemption," "as propitiation," "by his blood," "to be received," "by faith." This is what has dawned upon our sinful condition. This is the blazing sun that has risen on our cold, dark, and helpless condition. This is amazing grace.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

The Beauty of God

The goal of this text is not just to have you amazed with God's grace, but it is to have you behold the beauty of God. Grace is meant to lead you somewhere, or rather, to someone. As you sing about grace, it should create love in your heart for God. The beauty of God's grace leads us to the beauty of God Himself.

The second half of verse 25 and all of verse 26 are designed to show us something about God. Remember that verse 21 began with talking about the righteousness of God being "manifested." Well, we see a similar idea captured in connection between "righteousness" and "show." God aims to show us His righteousness. And we see that in His justice and His mercy.

Verse 26 identifies that the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus was provided after a long season of "divine forbearance" and how God had "passed over former sins." The idea here is that God had delayed His judgment on the rebellion of mankind. He had not immediately punished people for what their sins really deserved. There was forbearance; there was divine patience.

Let me take you back to my message a few weeks ago on fairness. Sometimes because of our perception that sin is not immediately judged and punished, we develop a distorted view of what is really fair. By that I mean that we can confuse "fair" with "normal." Sin seems normal, and when it is not immediately dealt with, we can start to think that this allowance for sinful actions is the true norm. But Paul highlights something really essential here, namely, that God's righteousness is so significant that the lack of immediate judgment is not owing to what is fair, but it is owing to God's forbearance and patience.

Instead, Paul would have us see that all of the sin committed against God was still present, still unjust and still dangerous. And it demanded an accounting. So Paul would have us see in God's mercy the reality of justice that was still required. Any gap in judgment is only because of God's patience, not because the injustice isn't real.

On a personal level, just think of how patient God has been with you. For both believers and unbelievers, God has treated us in a way that we fundamentally do not deserve. That is how

Romans helps us. It shows us who we really are, what we really deserved, and who God really is. The fact that He does not immediately and eternally condemn sinners is yet another evidence of His kindness. But there is even more.

Verse 26 is one of my most favorite verses in the Bible. The reason for this affection is because of the way that it balances the justice and the mercy of God. Here is what it says:

"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." (Romans 3:26, ESV)

This verse raises the question as to how God can be both just and justifier. In other words, how can God deal appropriately with the problem of sin and yet also forgive? To not punish the sin would violate His righteousness, and yet He is still forgiving. How is this possible?

The answer is the cross. It is here that justice and justification meet. At the cross is where we find both wrath and mercy, hatred for sin and love of sinner. The cross was the solution to the penalty for sin and the outpouring of mercy.

The plan of redemption involved the pouring out of the wrath of God for sinners on the sinless Son of God. As Jesus hung between heaven and earth, He appeased the cosmic demands for justice. Jesus paid our debt. He took our sins. He bore the penalty of our transgressions. He died in your place. And in so doing, He satisfied the requirements of divine justice. In other words: *"In my place, condemned he stood . . ."*

This sacrifice made possible the transaction of justification whereby God declares a person righteous. Jesus made it possible for a holy God to treat you with mercy. So when you think of God's grace, you need to think of it as a gift, something you receive, and something that comes to you freely. But you need to remember that grace is not free! No! It may be free to you, but it cost Jesus everything. Forgiveness comes to us by grace but it came through Christ by the cross.

The beauty of grace leads us to the beauty of God.

Living in the Light of Grace

There is something really beautiful about this text because it shows us the central message of the book of Romans and, really, the entire Bible. The beauty of God's grace and the beauty of God Himself have some implications for all of us.

This text is a great passage to consider if you are not yet converted. Just think of how much God has tolerated in your life and how many things that you have done which have gone uncovered, unpunished, and unaccounted for. Yet you and God know they are there. That is why you feel guilty and at times really empty. Today may be the day that you see, for the first time, the full beauty of God's grace, and if you feel yourself drawn to Jesus, I would invite you to turn from yourself and place your trust in Jesus.

There are others of you who are still searching deeply. Today may have been helpful but not fully so. You still have questions, and I'm glad you are here because there are many people here who would love to share the story of how the light of grace dawned in their lives. If a friend

invited you to come to church today, ask him or her about the moment when they saw the beauty of the cross and received Jesus.

For those of you who have received Jesus, a text like this is helpful because it should create worship in your soul. You ought to leave today with a view of God that leads you to a greater affection for who God is and what he has done.

It also means that the beauty of God's grace changes what you see and how you live. This amazing grace means that you embrace humility, not pride; forgiveness, not bitterness; purity, not immorality; truthfulness, not deception; compassion, not judgment; patience, not irritation; and a host of other fruit that fits with the very life of God. In fact, if you are not moved toward some kind of action, then you probably didn't see the sunrise in Romans 3.

The beauty of grace leads the beauty of God, and we are forever changed.

*My chains are gone
I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

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