

The Free Gift of Righteousness

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is from Romans chapter 3 verse 21 to 31. I'm reading from the Church Bible and it's page 1130.

! But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between the Jew and the Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

God presented Christ a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.

He did this to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires work? No. Because of the law that requires faith.

[1 : 27] For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is it God, the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles too.

Since there is only one God who justifies the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised with the same faith. Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law.

Thank you, David. Keep the Bible open in front of you. Let's pray and ask for the Lord's help as we come to His word. Let's pray.

Father, we do want to recognize together this morning that what we're engaged in now is not simply just a transfer of information from my brain to other people's brains. What we're involved in now is all of us, me included, coming to sit under your word to listen to your voice as you speak to us.

And so we pray that you might give us tender hearts and eager ears to listen. That the words that I say might be true and useful as you speak to us from your word. In Jesus name. Amen. Amen.

[2 : 46] I think what we can say from what we've seen in Romans so far, if you've been with us, is that God is committed, massively committed to at least two things.

The first thing that we've seen in Romans that God is massively committed to is showing himself for who he is. Revealing himself is the language that Paul uses in his book.

In other words, what we need to grasp first is that God is not hiding from us this morning. He is visible. God is present and visible in the story of the scriptures and the Old Testament law.

He is also visible in the world around us in the things that he has made. More than just that as well, he has revealed himself and made himself known to you in your own moral conscience.

You know what is right and what is wrong. That is the fingerprints of God in your life. Paul has even claimed in his book so far that the chaos of the world around us is not evidence that God does not exist, but is evidence that God does exist and has handed us over to a fractured relationship with him.

[3 : 59] Now, this revelation of God is not just intended for you to know that God is there. It's not just, you know, I'm here. It's not that. Instead, this revelation of God is meant to show you that God is righteous.

That is that the God who is there is a God without fault, a God who is perfect in power and perfect in glory and majesty. If all our attempts to kind of squash this news down and ignore it and pretend it's not there still.

So the righteousness of God's glory seeps out of every sunset of every mountain top view, every newborn miracle, every moral decision that we make, every nagging conscience that we have.

That's the first thing. God is massively committed to you and I knowing that he is there and he is righteous and powerful and majestic. God wants you and I to know that. He's committed to it. He's plastered it all over the world.

The second thing that we've learned from Romans so far is that God is also massively concerned about you and me. Perhaps this is more surprising. I think sometimes we think of power and majesty and glory as being aloof, don't we?

[5 : 14] Distant, far off, uninterested. But God is not like that. Instead, we find that the fracture in our relationship with God is not firstly his rejection of us, but is our rejection of him.

That's where it starts. Chapter one is really clear that God handed us over to our desire not to love him or love him. not his desire. Chapter two then shows us that in a sort of a perverse twist of religion, even of his religious law, we've used it as a means to keep God at arm's length. Nothing to see here, God. I'm all right.

But perhaps the most persuasive part of God's interest in us is seen in his commitment to judgment that we saw last week in Romans 3. God is committed to judging every individual who ever lived. And think about that for a moment. Where does judgment like that come from? I don't mean where does judgmentalism come from. We know judgmental people. We may be tempted to that ourselves. That's not what God is like. Instead, God's judgment is his commitment to pure justice, holiness.

Where does that come from? I want to suggest to you that is a function of his love. You and I care, don't we? We care about justice for a very limited number of people.

[6 : 37] We care about justice for the people that we care about, right? The people that we love. And the more I love, the more I care for justice for that particular individual.

You know, I hate to say this, but I don't actually lose any sleep whatsoever about fallouts between people I've never met. I don't really care. But we're told that God holds every individual in all of history and in all of the world to account for every moral action.

Why? Because he loves them and he cares about what they do. Right down to the last detail.

Listen, if the first idea, so these two ideas, right? The first idea is that the righteousness, the righteous power of God is like the unsuppressible fact of the universe.

You can't ignore it, right? If that's the first idea. The second big idea is that there's an irrepressible love of God for people that also can't be done away with. The first idea is that the first idea of God is the first person, given life by God, owed to him, loved by him.

Now, those two big ideas, God's self-evident righteousness and his intent on relationship with us, present you and I with a big problem this morning. Imagine it like this. Imagine that we are called to have an audience with the king in Buckingham Palace.

[7 : 58] The king has personally invited you. He wants to see you. And ahead of your trip to Buckingham Palace, he has sent you, you know, pictures of what it's like in there.

So he sent you pictures of the dining room, the golden cups, the fancy clothes. He's given you a video clip of what the banquet will look like, the way that people behave, the fine food, the fancy waiters pouring the wine, all that sort of stuff.

You know, the sort of the glory in the finery just sort of oozes out of every communication that he has with you. And that's all very good, isn't it? But then you begin to look at what you're wearing. You're wearing worn out jeans that haven't been washed for months. You're wearing a tatty hoodie that you found in the park. And you know that you haven't showered and frankly, others know it as well, but they don't say it to you.

And you're pretty sure that you've got some food on your face from the last time you ate. And on top of that, you've got no money to buy any new clothes. You've got no water in your taps and no soap to wash yourself. And so you're going to have a problem, aren't you?

[9 : 04] Either the king needs to lower his standards and meet you in McDonald's or, well, you need some kind of total makeover that you cannot afford because you're never going to be allowed to enter Buckingham Palace dressed as you are.

And that's the problem of Romans 1 to 3. That's where we are in Romans 3 verse 20. God the righteous one, unable because of his righteousness to have a relationship with sinful humanity because our sin excludes us from his presence.

It necessarily excludes us from his presence. It must do. And so that's the issue. And that's what Paul tells us is solved by the content of Romans chapter 3 verse 21 to 31.

I think you can make a pretty good argument for these being the most important verses in the Bible, the most important paragraphs ever written in human history. So let's look at them together. And I want you to notice three things. Firstly, I want you to notice a give awayable righteousness. Now, we've seen already that the fact of the universe is that God is righteous.

[10:11] It oozes from every pore of the world. But here is a different kind of righteousness. Look down at verse 21. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify.

Notice then this is a new kind of righteousness, perhaps more accurately, a new revelation of the same righteousness. This is God's righteousness from an angle that you have never seen it from before, an angle that's not visible in your nagging conscience that you can't see in the creation. Even the Old Testament law, although it hints at it, it never shows it to you in this kind of detail. Instead, this is a righteousness apart from the law. Look at the first four words of verse 22, which describe this angle on the righteousness of God.

This righteousness is given. It's given. In other words, what's new about this revelation of righteousness is that unlike the righteousness revealed in the law, this righteousness is give awayable.

It's transferable righteousness. It's the same in verse 24. It's the same in verse 24. Look down at verse 24. He puts it there as justified freely by his grace. Now, what's really useful to know is that in the Greek, which is the language in which the New Testament was written, the word for justified and the word for righteous are the same word.

[11:32] Right? To be justified is to be declared righteous. To be righteous is to be justified. So you look down again at verse 24 where it says justified freely by his grace.

You could translate that made righteous freely by his grace or a gift. Same word again. So this is the same thing. This is a revelation of righteousness of God that he is able to give away to others. Now, this is good news, isn't it? That God, the God who made us is not only righteous in power and glory and majesty, but he is also righteous in a way that he is able to give away to others.

You know, go back to the king illustration for a moment. You know, from the video messages and for the pictures of Buckingham Palace, the king is fancy, right? The king has high standards. The king has class, you might put it. He literally has class, right? We know that, don't we? But that's sort of what you expect of a king. You expect the king to have class.

[12:35] That's what he is. That's who he is. But here you're finding out that he has an ability to credit others with the same class. A class that he is able to give away, which is not what you would expect just from looking at the pictures, is it?

Or standing outside the palace. You need to be told that. And so it is with God. Now you can know that God is righteously powerful just by standing outside and watching the sun go down and the glory of a sunset.

And you can say, wow, the God who made that is both awesome in power and perfect in glory. You know when you, maybe you don't do this, but I'm sure you do.

When you lie awake at night and you think of the things that you've said and done that you shouldn't have done. Yeah? You know, don't you? You can know from that that that is because there is a righteous God who has implanted his moral conscience in your heart.

And so the reason you cannot sleep is because there is a nagging doubt that something that you've done is wrong. I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have done that. Now those things are visible and they're evident.

[13:48] But now what we're being told is that there is also another aspect to the righteousness of God that is not visible in the nagging conscience of the night or the sunset. It is that God is able to give away righteousness to others.

That's the first point. God's give awayable righteousness. Point number two, give awayable righteousness comes from the cross. Now this is the question.

Stay with me if you can, right? I can understand that God has a righteousness that comes from his moral perfection and his power in creating. That kind of makes sense, doesn't it? You know, God can't make a moral universe, the universe that we experience, without himself being moral.

That's just kind of common sense, right? But how on earth would a moral creator God get the power to give away righteousness to somebody else?

That would make nonsense of morality, wouldn't it? Think about it. Think about it. If God starts encountering unrighteous people, which we know we all are, right? And he says, oh, okay, don't worry about this.

[14:57] I've got give awayable righteousness. Here you go. Have that. Then all of a sudden morality becomes a nonsense, doesn't it? Because God is starting to declare righteous things that are unrighteous, people who are unrighteous.

And then that God himself would no longer be righteous because he's looking at unrighteousness and calling it righteousness. Do you follow? Do you follow? So how does God have, if you like, if we can put it this way, the moral credit to give away righteousness?

Where would that come from? Whilst also himself retaining moral righteousness. Well, look again at verse 24. And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Here it is then. Give awayable righteousness comes through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Redemption there is the word for buying back power, right?

You redeem a slave or you redeem something that you've given into a pawnbroker. You release it by paying the money. And Jesus has the moral buying power to give away righteousness.

[16:09] And how does Jesus have that? Where does that buying power come from? Verse 25. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood.

Here it is, right? This is, I think, this is perhaps the most important sentence in the most important paragraph, right? So stay with this. If you don't get this, the rest of the Bible will be a complete mystery to you.

Let's break it down. Jesus Christ is what is called a sacrifice of atonement. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement. That is, Jesus died.

He shed his blood, poured out his life on the cross. Not simply as a sign that God loves you, although it's a sign that God does love you. But it is a sacrifice designed to make atonement. Atonement there is literally at-one-ment. Bringing something back together. So his cross brings back together, makes at-one-ment between a holy God and sinful humanity.

[17:10] Restoring the broken relationship. And how does that work? Well, this is temple language, isn't it? This is how the law and the prophets testify to this give-away-able righteousness. They talk about forgiveness coming through sacrifice.

How there is a cost of forgiveness in this life. We know that, don't we? When someone offends you, for you to forgive them requires for you to pay a cost inside of yourself, doesn't it?

Whatever that might be. And so the cost or the payment for a life lived in rebellion against the God who made us is, understandably, a life, isn't it?

If you have taken a life, your own life from the God who made you, it is right that you forfeit life.

That's why the law contained animal sacrifices. Blood poured out in the place of sinful people.

On the altar. At the temple. Over and over and over again. But everybody knew. And even the law said that a goat and a bull could never stand in for a person. They're not equivalent.

[18:13] So the payment for sin was never made. It was just carried forward, as the end of verse 25 says. Until the time when God the Son, in human flesh, the infinitely valuable sacrifice, stood in our place, facing the judgment for sin that we deserved, shed his blood.

His life for our life. Now notice this really carefully. This isn't God taking out his vengeful anger and justice on an innocent third party.

I don't know whether you do this. This isn't the equivalent of getting home and kicking the dog for having a bad day at school, right? Or I'm just so frustrated and angry. It doesn't matter who I hit.

Notice that the sentence starts, God presented Christ.

Christ. And then it carries on at the end of verse 26. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

In other words, God is presenting himself to himself so that God's own righteousness is demonstrated. Being just, remember righteous, and being the one who justifies makes righteous.

[19:30] So God is making his righteousness give awayable in a righteous way by paying for it at the cross. Never for a moment compromising his morality or his righteousness.

Never sweeping sin under the carpet and pretending it doesn't matter. This is literally impossible to illustrate, okay? There's nothing like this in the world.

But come back with me for a moment. Let's have a go, right? The audience with the king. Let's try and capture a little bit of it if we can. You know, don't you, that if you walked into the king's banquet,

dressed as you were in filthy clothes, there's going to be trouble.

Specifically, there's going to be trouble with the king himself. He would be insulted by your arrival in such attire.

Yet still, the king longs to have you in his presence. So in an act of extraordinary condescension, the king himself leaves the palace, puts on your rags and your filth, and goes himself into the banquet, dressed in shame and dirt, into his own presence.

[20 : 43] Facing in himself the rejection of himself, that you would deserve should you have turned up in those clothes. And he does that not as some party trick, but for the sole purpose that you might wear his robes as you enter his glorious banquet.

So you gain access without pretending that you deserve to be there in your own right, and without for a moment the king compromising or lowering his standards.

This is it here. This is it here. The righteous God has bought the right to bring sinful you into his presence without for a moment compromising his moral standard at great personal cost to himself by sacrificing himself on the cross, shedding his blood in your place.

That you and I might righteously wear his righteousness, even as he, in the person of the son, as incomprehensible as it is, would wear your and my filthy sin.

Of course, this is where the illustration of the king of the banquet breaks down, or at least one of the places, because our problem is not the clothes that we wear, is it? Our problem is our hearts.

[22 : 07] If we're honest, our problem is not that we stumble into a few mistakes in life. Rather, our problem, as we've seen over and over in these last few weeks, is that we've turned in on ourselves.

We've become obsessed with ourselves. We were made to live for God, and yet we live for ourselves. And our moral horror is that twisted nature. And God in Christ takes the horrors of all of that on himself, that he might satisfy justice, so that he might buy for himself, give a weighable righteousness that he can give to you and I.

Give a weighable righteousness, pay at the cross. Number three, give a weighable righteousness is received by faith. Notice this at the end of verse 22. This is what we were doing with the kids. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

It's repeated at the end of verse 26. Look down in your Bibles. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just, and the one who justifies who? Those who have faith in Jesus.

This is so important. God has done all the work. His righteousness, it's his righteousness that he's giving away. Right? This is not our righteousness from our good works. God is not enabling us to do good works so that we earn our own righteousness.

[23 : 24] It's his righteousness given at the expense of the cross. But it has to be received.

Specifically received by faith. Now that I think is where verse 27 helps us out.

What is faith? Verse 27 explains. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. Faith then is the opposite of boasting. Boasting is excluded because of what law?

The law that requires works? No. Because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of the Jews only?

Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles too. Since there is only one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith. Do we then nullify the law by this faith?

Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law. Now there's a lot there, but notice faith is not works. Notice verse 28. Faith is apart from works.

[24 : 23] Faith is distinct from action. This faith is a universal requirement for anybody who would be restored to a relationship with God. It's the same. It doesn't matter whether you're a Jew.

It doesn't matter whether you're a Gentile. Gentile, remember, just the word for nations. Ethnic. It doesn't matter where you're from. Faith is not. And it's faith, verse 31, which is not a contradiction of the law.

That is God's moral requirements. Rather, it upholds it. How so? Well, because the legal requirements of the law are satisfied in the gift that faith receives.

So you can't boast about faith. Because faith is simply an empty hand that receives the gift of God's give-awayable righteousness through the payment that Jesus made at the cross.

Faith, then, is the opposite of works. Faith is the abandonment of works. Faith is literally saying, I can't work. I can't do.

[25 : 22] Jesus can. Faith says, I am ruined. Christ, repair me. I'm lost. Jesus, find me. I have nothing. You have everything.

Return to the palace one last time. This, then, is the invitation of the king, right? Come. Come and join my banquet. But you reply, listen, my clothes are filthy.

I have no way to get myself ready for such a banquet. Please, please, king, just help me to be better and to wash myself and then I'll be okay.

King replies, no, listen, son. It doesn't matter how many times you wash those jeans. They will still be ripped and not worthy of my presence. Oh, well, just help me stitch them back together then, will you?

No, listen, that will not do. They'll still be tatty old clothes with patches on them. There is only one way for you to enter my banquet, and that is wearing my clothes. And to wear my clothes, you need to accept them as a gift.

[26 : 32] That's it here. All that is needed to be done for sinners like me and you to enter the glory of heaven has been done by Christ on the cross.

He has power to liberate us from our sin and clothe us in his give-awayable righteousness. And faith receives that gift and enters the glory of knowing him and the promise of being with him eternally.

Now, that's the passage, right? God's give-awayable righteousness through Jesus' cross received only by faith in him. Let me ask you as I finish two questions that come from the passage.

The first one is this. Do you have this faith? We live at a time where people, I think, talk quite weirdly about faith, don't we?

Like it's some kind of mysterious energy that we work up. Oh, I'm a person of faith. Yes, I am. Yes, I have faith. But the faith in Romans 3 is not like that, is it?

[27 : 34] Faith in Romans 3 is the opposite of pride. Faith in Romans 3 exchanges self-confidence for Jesus' confidence. You can tell faith in Romans 3 says, oh, no, no, not I have faith.

It says Jesus saves, right? Let me ask you, do you have that faith? Alistair Begg, who's the Scottish preacher who spent most of his ministry in the US, has captured this idea with his illustration of the thief on a cross.

You may have seen it online. It's gone viral, I think, basically. The thief on the cross, you might remember, rebuked the other thief for mocking Jesus. He calls Jesus innocent and says that, Jesus, please remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus replies to the man, truly, I tell you, today you'll be with me in paradise. And the angel speaks to the man, truly, and says, well, how did you get here?

And the thief looks back at him and goes, I have absolutely no idea. And the angel says, well, I can see from your record here you've never been baptized.

[28 : 53] I can see from your record here you've never been to church. Let me get my supervisor angel. Maybe he can help. And the supervisor angel comes over and asks him, well, what are you doing here?

I don't know, he says. Well, let's get down to it then, he says. You know, what can you tell me about justification by faith, he says? I have no idea, he says.

I've never heard of it. Well, what about the doctrine of scripture? Do you know the doctrine of scripture? I've got no idea, he says. So the angel looks at him and says, well, tell me then, on what basis are you here?

And he says, I don't know. But the man on the middle cross said I could come. That's it, isn't it? The man on the middle cross said I could come. That's the faith of Romans 3.

It's the abandonment of any confidence in ourselves. And trust only in Jesus to fit us for glory.

Alistair Begg does a brilliant job in that illustration. And he points out, if you answer that question in any other way, if you say, you know, what are you doing here?

[30 : 04] If you answer in any other way than Jesus said I could come. If you answer in any other way, you're not a Christian. If you say, no, I'm here because I prayed a prayer. I'm here because I attended church.

I'm here because I was careful about moral living. It's not a Christian. I'm here because the righteousness that is required for me to be here was given to me by Jesus and him alone.

Let me encourage you this morning, especially if you've never done this before. Why don't you reach out to Jesus with an empty hand of faith and say, listen, I've got no confidence in me, Jesus,

but full confidence in you.

Take my sin stained life and give me your glorious righteousness that I might be fit for your presence. Do you have this faith?

Second question. Do you still have this faith? One of the things that you need to keep in mind as we go through the book of Romans is that it is written not so much for people new to Jesus, but to a church, which means that God doesn't want you just to start the Christian life with this kind of faith in Jesus.

[31 : 21] He wants you to live the Christian life with this kind of faith in Jesus. You know, this sort of abandoning all confidence in myself is not simply where the Christian life starts.

It's how the Christian life carries on every day. Jesus hasn't, you know, bought on the cross, give away of all righteousness so that you can sort of work on building your own over time.

It's kind of like trying to bling up the king's clothes as if you could do that. It's weird, isn't it? He has given you full perfection, perfect righteousness, that you might live your entire Christian life trusting in him and not yourself, looking to him and not you, growing confidence in his work and not your works, knowing that any work that you do is not contributing to your salvation.

It never could. Let's get really frank about this. Let's call out where this gets contradicted, right? It gets contradicted all the time. Listen, if you have a version of Christianity which starts with Jesus and then says, listen, to remain a Christian, I start like this.

Okay, everything you said, Steve, I agree with. I've started there. But I am carrying on as a Christian by attending mass, by confessing to a priest, by doing good works to stay in.

[32 : 42] Well, let me tell you, that's not Bible Christianity. If you have a version of Christianity that says, now, yeah, I agree with you, Steve, I'm starting with Jesus like that.

But Jesus now has liberated me totally of any sinful desire so that I'm now living a perfectly sanctified life, this side of glory, that any struggle with sin is just not real.

It's just perceived. You know, repentance and faith, that's how the Christian life starts. But it carries on in triumph and victory. That's not Bible Christianity either. Why?

Well, because Bible Christianity starts, ends, and has every little bit in between lived with confidence in Jesus and the gift of righteousness that he's purchased on your behalf. It lives and dies by that.

Christians contradict this all the time because there is still a part of our heart that wishes that we were earning our salvation, that wishes the Christian life was different. We're proud, aren't we?

[33 : 43] We love a little bit of works. You know, if we'd invented the Christian life, we'd have invented it so that when Christ came, he liberated us of every impulse to sin so that we could build an impressive portfolio of our own righteousness.

Christians are full of people doing that. Oh yes, I'm so much better than anybody else in this room. Utter rubbish. You know, if that's what a Christian life is, it would require God to lower his standards. Maybe not meet you in McDonald's, maybe meet you in Sam's Chicken, which is a little better, isn't it? But he doesn't want you to meet him in Sam's Chicken. He wants you to meet him in the glories of heaven, in the new creation.

And the only way there is with perfect righteousness. And the only way to get perfect righteousness is to receive it as a gift by faith. And faith is the continued abandonment, day by day, of confidence in myself and place my confidence in Jesus.

And how do you know that you're doing that? Well, it seems, doesn't it, that to keep us trusting in Jesus Christ alone, God and his wisdom sends us perpetual reminders, not only of his all-sufficiency.

[34 : 49] His all-sufficiency is wonderful, isn't it? I love every reminder of the all-sufficiency of Jesus. It's brilliant. Jesus is everything. But he also sends me perpetual reminders of my own weakness, which is more difficult, but also necessary, so that I might place my confidence not in me, but in Christ, that we might live by faith in Jesus, who has God's give-away-able righteousness that he brought at the cross.

Let me pray as we close. Let's take a few moments in our own halls just to pray and respond, maybe to reaffirm our faith in Jesus, maybe to put our faith in him for the very first time.

Amen. Father God, it is amazing that you would give us your righteousness and that you would pay through the blood of your son that we might receive it.

Father, we want to say that we're sorry for every little attempt that we've made to build our own righteousness, every attempt we've had to trust in ourselves and not Christ.
We say together this morning that we turn to you. We're sorry for our sins. We want to live by faith in the Jesus who died for us, who rose again, and who will welcome us into glory one day.
[36 : 34] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.