

The Greatest Reveal of All Time

Romans 3:21-26

“The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the article on which the church stands or falls”

Martin Luther

Introduction: Great reveals. They feel like they come out of nowhere, but on review or rewind, one can piece the information together and see it coming. The discoveries of King Tut’s tomb in 1922 or the wreck of the Titanic in 1985 confirmed what many had theorized about Egyptian dynasties and the fateful transatlantic voyage, but until finding the actual proof, mystery remained. You probably remember when you discovered that Luke Skywalker’s arch enemy was really his father (spoiler alert), amazed by script writing that even the original author had not planned. And just wait until we finally discover who killed JFK and who is actually running all the AI in the world!!!!

Romans 3:21-26 provides the greatest reveal of all time. Though it was there the whole time in the Old Testament yet looking forward to the future, the New Testament clarified the bright and public nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What Paul lays out is not new information, but much needed clarity on the gospel that was already held by the church.

Martin Luther said that the teaching in this passage decides whether the church will stand or fall. John Calvin noted that when this is neglected, the church is destroyed. RC Sproul added that without the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the gospel is not merely compromised; it’s lost altogether. It is incumbent on every generation, every church, and every believer to understand the gospel in its fullness, not only to share and defend it, but because it is the pathway to knowing and glorifying God in Christ.

But isn’t the gospel simple? *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved?* (Acts 16:31; 1 Cor. 15:1-2) The answer is YES, the gospel is simple and we come to Christ by faith alone. But we’d say it’s simple like getting married is simple. All you have to do is sign a piece of paper and say “I do”, and you’re married. Simple. But everyone would say there is much more that goes into getting married, staying married, and understanding marriage than that alone. In a recent article by Jared Wilson that there has been much *gospel confusion* that came out of the *gospel-centrality movement* that was faithfully perpetuated by men like John Piper, John MacArthur, RC Sproul, and DA Carson, but that has lost some its steam in the last few years. In the last few years it is clear that for many, the gospel has become a catch-phrase or marketing tool, rather than a life transforming truth. Wilson concluded:

*“I realized then that what we need to work harder to explain the **what** and the **why** of gospel-centrality. I was reminded that, for many, gospel-centrality is not a **biblical paradigm but a cultural reference.**”¹*

For the few weeks we will delve into beautiful, magnificent, and transforming realities of the gospel, the good news declared to us all, which is received by faith alone in the work of Christ alone.

Righteous Solution to a Universal Problem (21-22c)

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.

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/are-you-still-gospel-centered>

Let's go back to the courtroom. Paul has been acting as the prosecuting attorney before the Judge of the Universe, and has put the whole world on trial. His opening statement was the fact that the gospel is the *"power of God for salvation to everyone who believes"* (1:16), a life-giving and hopeful message for all people, everywhere, for all time. But there is an inherent problem offering salvation to someone: *they must believe they NEED SAVING to actually BELIEVE the means of salvation.* Humanistic and secular thinkers, or those who have rejected God and elevated man's thoughts above Him, have believed they could find some sort of 'salvation' apart from God. We see it in politics, where the belief comes around each generation that if government can CONTROL the means of production and aspects of life, everyone will thrive. People will turn to science and technology, hoping that if we *progress enough* we can solve our most pressing problems and find peace. I just heard Elon Musk comment that with the proliferation of AI, work will become a hobby, not a necessity. Others will turn to *education*, with the hope that *enlightenment* will come true freedom. We know historically, each of these actually turn to misery, hopelessness, and are devoid of answering the foundational questions that everyone must deal with, including what we do with our sin, what happens when I die, and what am I living for.

So one by one, group by group, Paul brings in evidence to his argument that ALL OF MANKIND is guilty before the Lord and thus **deserving of His wrath** and in desperate need of salvation. Every human at the heart level is rebellious against God, and thus **exchange** the truth of God for a lie in **idolatry**, exchange the glory of God for sin in **immorality**, and are given over to their sin in **insanity**. This makes sense in the evaluation of those who are overtly sinful, but what about those who live a moral life, those that are basically good, who are kind, and who follow the rules? Those who keep the law because of what is written on their conscience AND those who kept the moral Law of the Old Testament are in the same boat. The requirement to attain righteousness through the Law is simple: it must be **complete without even one minor infraction**. **1 Peter 1:15-16** says *"he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* Perfect holiness is the standard, and no deviation would be tolerated.

The religious Jewish leaders did an admirable job of *attempting* to keep the Law, creating man-made rules as hedges around the Law itself so as to not get close to violating the Ten Commandments. They obeyed, kept the festivals, and circumcised their sons. But this did NOT satisfy the requirement of the Law. In fact, Jesus used them to show the inadequacy of this type of pursuit:

Matthew 5:20 *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

This would have been shocking to the audience of Jesus' day, since no one touched the fastidious keeping of the law as the Pharisees, and yet even they fell short...waaaaay short. Paul concluded his salvo against all mankind this way:

Romans 3:19-20 *"Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin"*

As the charges were levied, there were **three main responses and realities**: 1) No one has any recourse, objection, or new evidence to present, other than to give our silence. We are guilty, we know it, and we wait for sentencing. 2) We stand condemned together with the rest of the world, and whether we believed before or not, we NOW all know that we stand before a HOLY, GLORIOUS God and we are

found wanting before Him. 3) What we THOUGHT could save us in keeping the Law was found to be a fool's errand, since all the Law could do is point out our sin and heap on our condemnation. THE LAW CANNOT SAVE BECAUSE IT NEVER COULD. Its intention was to drive us to the reality that we could not keep it, that we are immoral and thus fall short of God's standard, which should simply drive us to our knees to call out for mercy.

As the sentencing begins, the expectation of sentencing would have been judgment under wrath, an eternal and just recompense for our sin. But it is at this moment that **Paul reveals (once again) the greatest news of the universe....**

"But now" signals that in the present, there is a solution possible, but it had to be from the **initiative of God**, not our own, since we had no ability to offer anything to overcome our sentence.

- **God's righteousness is revealed APART from the Law** – All of a sudden there is a flicker of hope for all of us, since the Law did its part and continues to do its part. But now we know there is an alternative to understand and gain God's righteousness.
- **The whole of the Old Testament spoke to this reality** – We'll look at this more in depth in chapter 4, but for now we know that God's righteousness understood apart from the Law and by faith alone was NOT a new concept, but through the entirety of the canon. Genesis 15:6 revealed that Abraham **believed** and it was **counted** to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3). Habakkuk 2:4 said the "righteous would live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). Salvation was NEVER about keeping the Law or by works, but was always a result of faith in a Messiah/Savior.
- **God's righteousness is received by FAITH through the work of Jesus Christ** – This is repeated from Rom. 1:16, but the emphasis is on faith in the object of Jesus Christ alone. Now, we will come back to this reality as well, but belief in Jesus is the only basis of salvation, but that belief is MORE than just saying the words. RC Sproul said, "*A profession of faith doesn't justify anybody. It's the **possession of faith that justifies.***" There is a difference, then, of merely saying the words, praying a prayer, or knowing facts about Jesus. Even the demons *believe* in Jesus (James 2:19) and are not redeemed. This faith is also not just faith in anything, but in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. We **entrust ourselves to His work, believing in our mind, with our will, and desiring to follow.** As Sproul famously said, "***Faith alone does not stay alone.***" True faith WILL produce righteous living, and that is what Paul explains next, as to *how that is possible.*

Righteous Possibility for Sinful Mankind (22d-25b)

*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.***

Unafraid of repetition, Paul once again emphasizes the fact that everyone: Jew, Greek, church, unchurched, barbarian, man, woman, moralist, immoral, tribal, third world, sophisticated, etc. are all in the same boat. This is why it is good and right to memorize **Romans 3:23**, as we should together as a church: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* If the most basic meaning of "sin" is "missing the mark", the description of falling short of God's glory is more illustrative and layered. Sin is more than active disobedience. It is ANYTHING in your heart, mind, desire, attitude, or action that **falls short of glorifying God**, since we were made in His image to reflect back His glory. This means sin is both

what we do and don't do, what we say, think, and act on. *How does this affect everyone?* The moralist especially likes to compare himself to others, and on that sliding scale, we are WAY better than the *really bad people*. Many unbelievers I've interacted with believe God will save them because they are *relatively good* compared to the real baddies out there. Which might be a case to make if the standard was OTHER PEOPLE. But the standard is **God's infinite glory and impeccable holiness**.

The comparison would be like our staff lining up at the edge of the Grand Canyon (which I heard has great sunrises in August!) with a contest of who can jump over. We'd all get a running start, and I'm pretty sure I could jump further than some of our guys, but even if Josh Starkey could outjump all of us (he's real wirey!), he'd still fall insanely short of the goal, and would join everyone else flattened on the Canyon floor (I'll let you figure out who would hit first).

So, how does it happen? How does God move a bunch of people sentenced to wrath into righteousness? It's called the miracle of the gospel! We had NOTHING to offer, nothing to give, so God did it for us.

"And are justified by his grace as a gift" – Let these words wash over your mind, heart, and soul like the sweetest smelling, most satisfying, and fresh air you've ever breathed. Here is what God did in the courtroom. Knowing that we could not save ourselves or make ourselves righteous, He instead gave the sentence of **declaring us righteous!** This is a *forensic or legal declaration*. Notice that He does not say we ARE righteous, but counts us as righteous. This is important for two clear reasons. 1) He is not saying we are declared righteous pending us *becoming righteous*, He simply says we are legally right with God. This is a total and complete **gift** (the word is 'dorean', which means free of charge, at no cost, without payment, gratis), meaning is not something that can be earned at any level. 2) Luther taught this simultaneous reality this way. We are both righteous and still a sinner. He used the *Latin phrase "Simul Justus et peccator"*, which means "Simultaneously just/righteous yet a sinner". We are not free from sinning, but are no longer condemned as a sinner. This is only and totally by faith, which itself is a gift of grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

But how can God do that? Is this a magic wand or is it the work of a capricious judge? The answer is in the next phrase: *"through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood"*.

There is always a cost attributed to sin. Sin demands a payment, and that payment is not made to Satan (this is where C.S. Lewis got it a bit skewed in the LW&W) but is a payment that God Himself demands. Violating God's righteousness demands that His righteousness had to be satisfied. That is why Paul refers to the work of Jesus on the cross as **redemption**, which has a range of meaning of *release, deliverance, or ransom*. It was the idea of buying a slave out of the market, out of bondage, and satisfying the payment so that they could go free. Our sin made us **slaves**, held in bondage under its power and being crushed under its weight, with death being the inevitable outcome (see Rom. 6:17, 20; 1 Cor. 15:56). Jesus ransomed us from our sin, paying the price for it.

What was the price? Blood. The blood of a perfect sacrifice. Specifically, the blood of a sacrifice that kept and fulfilled the entirety of the Law in all righteousness, holiness, and upholding the glory of God. It was the sacrifice of a willing participant, One who was willing to die for His Father (Luke 22:42) and display His glory (John 17:4). The blood of Jesus is described the following ways:

- ...you were not *redeemed* with corruptible things, [like] silver or gold, from your aimless conduct [received] by tradition from your fathers, but **with the precious blood of Christ**, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (1 Peter 1:18-19)
- In Him we have *redemption through His blood*, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace... (Ephesians 1:6b, 7)
- ...the Son of His love, in whom we have *redemption through His blood*, the forgiveness of sins... (Colossians 1:13b, 14)
- And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; For You were slain, and have *redeemed* us to God **by Your blood** out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation... (Revelation 5:9)

It is right to say that salvation is free of charge, since we could NOT earn grace, but it is NEVER cheap! Cheap grace says that you can profess to know Christ and want Him to save you, but it does not necessitate any change. Christ poured out His life through His blood to save sinners, so that we could LIVE righteously in and for Him. That is what we see in the next phrase.

"whom God forward as a propitiation by His blood" – This is so good! Propitiation seems like a strange word, but it is magnificent. The word (*hilasterion*) carries with it **two main ideas**, both important in our life of righteousness in God. **First** it has the idea of **expiation**, which is the idea of being forgiven or having our sin taken away from us. It is Jesus' blood alone that allows us to have our guilty verdict overturned. This is exactly what Colossians 1:13 says above. But the work of Jesus' blood did much more than just forgive. **Second**, His blood *satisfied the wrath of God*, allowing God to save us from Himself. This means that when in a few hours on the cross, God poured out the entirety of His wrath for sin, all of it – what I've done, do, and will do --- and treated Christ like He would have treated me for an eternity (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ became a **substitute** for us, taking the punishment we deserved on Himself so that God could forgive us and redeem us. This is important enough to understand, let's talk through a few implications:

- Salvation is more than just a "pardon" for sin, though that is part of it – If we were merely pardoned or forgiven, we would still be in a tough position. Presidential pardons are given out today --- actually many have been signed for automatically --- and they offer forgiveness of the wrong done at a federal violation level, but they do NOT expunge someone's record. In other words, it deals with half of ledger, offering forgiveness but NOT JUSTICE. The sentence is cut short without the payment being paid in full. The only way a pardon could be *propitiation* is if the president offers to serve the rest of the time for the one pardoned or pay the rest of the recompense.
- This means that there is truly a **Double Imputation** of righteousness in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross – He pays for our life of sin, and we GET His life of righteousness. The answer to the question: *why does God allow us into heaven or in a relationship with Him, even though we are still sinful?* **It's the life and work of Jesus Christ alone.** We are clothed, covered, and draped in His righteousness, what has been called a foreign righteousness that is unearned and received. This is the divine COVER-UP ---- the scandal of the cross ---- that the righteous died for the unrighteous, giving His life for ours, and gifting us His righteousness.
- The implication of this is monumental. We are NOT only forgiven, but we have a new, foreign, alien righteousness which allows us, motivates, and moves us to actually be righteous. You are

saved as a wretched sinner, and we continue to battle our wretched sin, but now we do it with the reality and identity of having Christ's righteousness given to us. This speak to the believer who thinks him/herself as unable or unworthy after believing in Jesus. We are forgiven and declared righteous, saved by the work of Jesus alone.

And all of this **by faith alone**. Faith is the *instrument of salvation, not the means*. We are not saved by our faith but by the work of Jesus through the gift of believing that truth. Again, faith itself is NOT a work, but a gift that we receive and thus act on. This means that if God has given us the ability to see God's righteousness, our sin, our need for salvation, and the work of Jesus Christ, He has initiated salvation that we get to enjoy. And once we believe, being declared righteous and thus turning from our sin, we now can live a life of continual and growing faith and repentance.

Is this the gospel that you understand, know, and live out? Is this the gospel that you proclaim? Is this the gospel that helps you see and savor Jesus Christ, to thank Him, and live each day dependent on His grace? This is the gospel we bank our life on, are willing to live and die for, and will faithfully preach and teach until Christ returns or calls us home. Are you with us? This is the greatest reveal of all time, and we get to hear it, enjoy it, and revel in it.

Next week we'll pick up the next idea and continue on through verse 31.

Righteousness Maintained by a Just God (25c-26)

*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.*