

THE GREATEST CRY OF THE HUMAN HEART

Romans 3:21-24

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Donnie Moore was one of the most outstanding pitchers of baseball during the 1986 season. Many felt that he was primarily responsible for the California Angels' bid for their first ever division pennant. They had real hopes of winning the division, and then representing the American League in the World Series. I was in my early 30s when I watched that final game for the ALCS. It was the bottom of the ninth, with two outs and the Angels ahead. After having pitched a great game, Donnie Moore placed one ball a mere six inches too much over the plate and watched it hit for a game winning home run, knocking the Angels out of contention for not only their very first division title, but also the opportunity to go to the world series. Inside, he was a crushed person. He was six inches from winning the game and being a hero. Instead, he became the goat.

For the next several weeks, people repeatedly saw on instant replay and read in the *Los Angeles Times*, over and over again, about that one bad pitch Donnie Moore threw. Months later, upon being interviewed, he was questioned about that ill-fated pitch. It was obvious to all who watched or listened that Donnie Moore was still devastated by the game-ending turn of events.

Donnie Moore's career never escaped the bondage of that one mistake. The next year, he was determined never to make that kind of mistake again. But as a result of being too careful and fearful of putting the ball in too good a place over the plate, Donnie Moore's effectiveness as an aggressive strike-out pitcher declined. Before the next year's end, he was traded from the Angels. Within two years, he was out of baseball. As far as he was concerned, his life was over. His whole identity and sense of purpose and worth was wrapped up in being a major league pitcher. But suddenly, he was no longer a feared and successful pitcher. He was a has-been, a failure.

Depressed and defeated, Donnie Moore took his life. He was a husband and father who could not see through his failure to realize that baseball is not the end all. He could not see that his ultimate worth was far greater than his ability to throw a baseball. His children and wife loved and needed him, but he just couldn't see them through his failure.

At the time, I was a young father about the same age. His suicide impacted my life in a major way. I learned from that event that the greatest cry of the human heart, the driving addiction of every individual, is to know that they have been a success, performed well in their lives, and received the respect of those around them. No one wants to be rejected due to failure. To know that others approve of us tends to give us the sense that our lives count. We have value and worth.

When Donnie Moore could no longer pitch, he had no identity, no sense of significance, and he felt he had lost the respect of the baseball world. When a person does not sense that he or she is approved or when someone no longer feels that they can perform as they once did, the results are often disastrous. Some get angry. Others dive into a depression or simply become hard to live with.

- Why are we addicted to approval or success?
- Why are some students caught up in having to get straight As?
- Why are athletes so driven to win? Why are some people perfectionists about a clean car, kitchen, garage, or being able to paint the perfect picture?
- Why is it that as many active Christians get older and can no longer do what they once did, they wish to quit?

I believe it is because both Christians and non-Christians either don't understand the truth of the Gospel or have forgotten how that truth applies to their lives right at that moment. Instead, their minds are bombarded with lies whose source is not God, but the evil one.

The book of **Romans** gives us answers to these questions. From the very outset of this book, we learn that the problem with our drive for approval and success is rooted in our suppressing or ignoring or exchanging the truth about God with a lie.

When we disregard Who He is and what He, our very creator, says is true about us, we have no idea who we are. We lose perspective of the great value we have in Him. We are incapable of discerning what significant purpose He had in creating us and giving us our lifespan. In the end, people wander through life with no real purpose or reason for living. When individuals turn their backs on the One who created them, they lose all connection to what it means to have value and significance. But when they discover Jesus and begin to grasp the truth about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are rewarded with a love for life and a reason for living, regardless of how difficult their present circumstances may be. This Gospel of Jesus Christ and its practical implications for living our lives to the fullest is what the book of **Romans** is all about.

Let me show you this as we look at an overview of a portion of **Romans**, and then we will dive in and look at our passage of study this morning. This chart is an overview of the first eight chapters of **Romans**. It breaks down into four parts. The first is the introduction to the book, **1:1-17**, in which Paul introduces us to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Early on, Paul declares that Jesus proved Himself to be the Son of God, the Savior of the world, through his death and resurrection, which was prophesied in the Old Testament. Paul clearly states that there is only one thing that can save and transform the life of a person, and that is the Gospel.

Then, beginning with the next verse, we come to the first major block or section of **Romans**. It makes up the next three parts, covering **1:18-8:39**. In these parts, Paul tells us why humanity needs the gospel, why we need saving, why we need help getting our lives together, and how Jesus Christ can transform the most wasted life into a thing of beauty--a trophy of God's grace that brings Him glory and honor. He begins, in **1:18-23**, by telling us that humanity has a serious problem. The problem was birthed as a result of each and everyone one of us suppressing the truth about God. This includes Christians. We suppress the truth about God when ignore Him, live like He doesn't exist, or exchange the truth of God for a lie. In the end, this leads the human race to suffer the wrath of God. In other words, God says, "So, you don't want to worship me or seek after me, fine. You don't have to. I'll let you live your lives on your own and see how that works out for you."

In **verses 24-3:20**, Paul makes it clear that the rejection of God leads to a total breakdown of human life. We saw in the last part of chapter one that

humanity suffers from a total sexual, mental, relational, and societal breakdown as a direct result of having turned their backs on God.

Beginning with **verse 24**, the Apostle Paul, like a district attorney, sets forth his case, proving that all humanity stands guilty of having rejected God, not truly sought after Him, and exchanged the truth about God for a lie. Paul proves that no human being is able to rectify the problem through our own best efforts to reconcile ourselves to God to stand secure before Him, accepted and approved. In short, apart from Jesus Christ, we all stand condemned by God to spend eternity separated from Him. That's the truth; that's the bad news; but it is not all of the truth.

Beginning with **Romans 3:21**, which is where we begin this morning, Paul lays out for us the Good News. God has provided a solution for humanity's damnation: the Gospel. For the next three weeks, we will be looking closely at God's solution to the human race's biggest problem. We will uncover the truth of how it is that we, once and for all, can find God's forgiveness, acceptance, and approval so that no matter what failure we might experience, no matter what standard or goal we may not be able to attain, no matter what abilities have been taken away from us, we still have a reason to live. Even though life has turned out different than we ever expected, when we fully grasp and hold on to the truth about the Gospel, we will find our lives still purposeful under the absolute affection and love of God! We can even find meaning in doing less, without being bored. Living a bored life is a clear sign that a Christian has forgotten the truth of the Gospel, and the truth of who they are in Christ. Boredom is the outward evidence that one has embraced a lie about God and themselves.

If Donnie Moore could have heard and understood the truth of the Gospel, and specifically what we are going to start looking at today in **Romans**, I'm convinced that he would not have left his wife a widow and his children fatherless. Unfortunately, there are many Christians who are saved but still do not understand how the finished work that Jesus Christ performed on the cross on our behalf makes a significant difference in their lives. Somehow Satan has blinded many Christians from the truth and deceived them. Because some Christians have not understood the truths we are going to begin looking at, because they could not grasp nor apply these truths to their lives, some have followed the path of Donnie Moore.

This morning, we begin looking at the good, the great, the wonderful news of the truth of the Gospel. We are looking at God's only solution to the problem of human sin. As we do, we see to what lengths Jesus has gone to meet the cry of the human heart to find approval, meaning, and purpose in life.

We are going to read **Romans 3:21-26**; however this morning, we won't get past **verse 24**. There are at least four extremely important expressions used in these verses that are not part of our normal everyday conversation, but they are critical for us to understand. If we don't know what they mean or how they relate to each other and to our lives, then we Christians can easily move through our Christian lives never truly experiencing the blessing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To accomplish this understanding of the Gospel through getting a grip on these terms is going to take time, and we are going to take that time over the next few weeks.

As we consider these important expressions, let me remind you of the Apostle Paul's prayer to the Ephesian Christians, in **Ephesians 1:17-19**. Why does he pray this? Because Paul knows that just like a newborn baby doesn't understand to whom it belongs or his purpose for being born, Paul knows that Christians can be saved, but not fully understand who they are in Christ. So Paul prays this:

¹⁷[I pray] **that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know [right now, experientially] what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.**

In the vernacular, Paul is praying that the readers of this Ephesian letter, us, get the significance of the Gospel and how it applies to our lives today.

Let me just give you the quick list of expressions we will be addressing beginning this morning and in the weeks ahead, and then we will read our passage. They are “**the righteousness of God,**” “**justified,**” “**redemption,**” and “**propitiation.**” Each one of these terms are worthy of a sermon in and of themselves, but we won’t be doing that. Now let’s read our passage.

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom 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. ²⁶It 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.

“**But now.**” Those are words that come with a sigh of relief. In light of what has been explained in the first two and a half chapters, these words are words of hope. They mark a shift in Paul’s focus from the hopeless situation that all humanity faces due to their sin and their suppression of the truth about God, to God’s solution and only hope for human beings to find relief from God’s wrath. In what we are going to read, we will see God’s solution that brings about total forgiveness, acceptance, and approval to those who put their complete confidence in Christ’s finished work of dying on the cross in our place, and His solution to mankind’s problem of sin, which has led to a sense of boredom and loss of significance, value, and identity.

The first significant expression we need to consider is **“the righteousness of God.”** It occurs four times in **verses 21, 22, 25, 26.** In addition, the verb **“justify”** that comes from the same root word as **“righteousness”** occurs twice, (**verses 24, 26**), as well as the adjective **“just”** which occurs once (**verse 26**). To a good observer of these short verses, this repetition of one term should scream out what? **“This term is extremely important if you want to understand this passage!”**

The expression **“the righteousness of God”** is used in two ways throughout the book of **Romans.** In one context, it refers to the character of God: He is uniquely set apart from all human beings and all of His creation and He is full of integrity. It also drives home the point that of any in His creation, He is the only one who **“has it all together.”** There is nothing wrong or missing in God.

Furthermore, the **“righteousness of God”** speaks of His being the source of all that is righteous and the only one who can make others righteous. Paul tells us in **verse 21**, **“This has been clearly explained in the Old Testament through the law and the prophets.”** This is how Paul uses this expression in **verses 25-26.**

In **verses 21-22**, the **“righteousness of God”** points to His righteous actions toward human beings that flow out of His righteous character. Thus, God can be counted on as being righteous, faithful, and truthful in all of his dealings with and actions toward human beings.

Hence, if one truly wants to be forgiven, approved of by God, and having their act together in this life, God is the only one who can be counted on as being faithful and truthful in all of His actions toward you to make it so. In other words, if Donnie Moore had wanted, or you want, to become whole or to get your act together and to feel ultimate approval, you must know God’s approval. For God is not the only source of righteousness which leads to approval; but in the end, His approval as the sovereign ruler of the universe will be the only approval that matters.

So, when the Bible says that God deals with us righteously, it refers to His fair, merciful, loving work in our lives that makes us whole, approved, accepted, and having it together. The more Jesus is allowed to lead us and work in us, the more His transforming power heals us body, soul, and spirit. One day, when we are with Jesus, we will be made fully whole. We will once and for all **“have it all together!”** In the meantime, the more we trust in Him

and walk with Him, the more we will feel whole, which will be noticed by our spiritual fruit of increased **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”**

So, if we put it all together, **“The righteousness of God”** refers to God’s perfect character, out of which he deals faithfully with us to perfect us.

Paul goes on in **verse 21** to say that **“God’s righteousness,”** His reaching out to lost humanity to provide a way of salvation that they could not possess on their own, His righteous plan for saving hopeless humanity, has been manifested or revealed. And this plan has nothing to do with the law, small letter “l,” referring to the Gentiles’ own moral code that even a Gentile can’t keep. God’s righteous plan is separate from that. God’s righteous plan is separate from the laws of God demanded in the Old Testament Law and prophets, which the Jews failed miserably to keep. The whole Old Testament is witness to God’s character and faithful working with the human race, even though the human race continues to reject Him and His faithfulness.

Remember, in **Romans 1:24-3:20**, Paul demonstrated that neither being a Jew and trying to earn God’s approval by obeying the Law of God, nor being a Gentile and trying to earn God’s approval by living up to a personal law, could fully prove themselves holy and acceptable to God.

Knowing our problem, our righteous loving God provides His righteous way through faith in Jesus Christ for anyone to be forgiven and made whole and acceptable to God. Faith alone saves us; faith alone is what will bring about transformation in our lives; and faith alone keeps us. We can’t earn or maintain our salvation by works--only by faith.

And this invitation is for all who, by faith, choose to put their trust in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. There is no distinction or no partiality or favorites with God. This opportunity to be saved is open to all. And it must be open to all. Why? Paul tells us in **verse 23**, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**

What does it mean to **“fall short of the glory of God?”** The glory of God refers to the full acceptance of God so that one can stand and dwell in His magnificence without fear of being destroyed due to our imperfection and unholiness.

But because all have sinned, we all stand in need of God's solution to our spiritual deadness, brokenness, and loss of identity and self-worth. All people are in need of being made whole and completely acceptable and right with God. This is what every human heart hungers for--the ultimate approval and acceptance from the only one who counts, God.

The next important term in the text gives us one of the righteous acts of God that flows out of His righteous loving character, aimed at meeting the need of the greatest cry of the human heart. It is "**justification.**" Justification is one of the most important terms found in the scriptures. I have found that many of you in this room, like many other Christians, know what this word means and you can define it. But I have found that few of you have come to truly understand its practical importance in your lives. "**Justification**" is a legal term that means "to declare righteous and acquitted." Many Christians can tell you that.

We have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But to be declared righteous means that the person who puts their confidence in Christ's work on their behalf alone, not in self-effort or works, but solely in what Jesus did on the cross, has been forgiven, acquitted of all charges against him or her, for all of their sin, past, present and future! Thus, once and for all, all who put their trust in Christ's work on their behalf have been made totally acceptable and approved of by God. This approval can never be improved upon, because Jesus already did it all. We can't improve upon his perfect and complete work. This acceptance can never be lost by a failed effort, because we did nothing to earn God's acceptance in the first place. Our text, **verse 24**, says it was a "**gift.**"

This forgiveness, acceptance, and approval of God gives our life value and worth. God says to the broken, "I have forgiven you, saved you, accepted you, and approved of you. No action or person can remove you from my love or the great value I have put in you. You have a worth that can never be taken away from you, because I, the forever ruling Sovereign King, say so!"

Because of my justification in Christ, I am deeply loved, have been completely forgiven, am fully accepted, and am finally and forever approved. Regardless of my past, my life now and forever has worth and I have an eternal purpose.

Imagine if Donnie Moore could have pitched baseballs simply because it was fun and he was good at it and never had to fear losing other people's approval or acceptance. Imagine if the only One whose opinion mattered most had said to him, "Donnie, I love you! Go out there and give it your best and have fun! Whether you win or lose, it does not matter. I love you and created you to pitch. And when I bring your pitching career to a close, I will have something even better for you to do." I'm convinced that if Donnie Moore had heard those words and believed them, the cry of his heart would have been satisfied, and he would not have feared the day he lost a game or could no longer pitch. In the end, the cry of Donnie's heart would have been satisfied, knowing he was loved by God, and that his life always would have value and worth.

God's Word is saying that Jesus so loved you that He knew when you were saved you would still blow it. But that was okay, in that it would not change His relationship with you. You were still secure in his love, approval, and acceptance. Following a failure, God may bring some present case discipline in your life to teach and further transform you into the person deep down you and God want you to be. But rest assured, with sin and failure, there is not condemnation or clucking of the tongue "**for those who are in Christ Jesus.**"

Nobody I know enjoys the heart burn of failure or the biting sting that follows making a mistake. Nobody I know enjoys the wound of a critical attack or rejection by another. But those hurts can quickly be neutralized and relieved when we stop to consider the truth of Christ's finished work on the cross, by which He, the King of Kings, has justified, accepted, forgiven, and approved of you. When the One being who really counts, the Almighty God, puts His arm around you and says, "You have been acquitted, forgiven, and accepted by Me. What others may think or say about you from now on, in the end, does not matter. "Keep your eyes on me. Keep your ears attuned to my words: I love you so much that I died for you that I might hold you in my affectionate arms for eternity. Abide in My love and complete acceptance and approval of you."

My friends, are there any of you who claim to be followers of Jesus and feel this morning the sting of personal failure, feel the pain of rejection, or feel that life has passed you by? If so, close your ears to the lies that you are worthless and remember the truth. Jesus is saying, "I love you. I have not abandoned you. You may feel alone and without purpose, but you are not. I am with

you. Come away with me and seek my face. Rest in me and I will give you life.”

There may be others of you here who are tired of trying so hard to earn the approval of someone close to you. It would be nice to have, I know. I have felt that myself. But you don't need it. What you really need is the forgiveness, acceptance, and approval of the only One who counts, Jesus Christ.

But you feel that your past guilt and shame for wrong doing keeps you from that. You wish your life could have a “do over.” Well you can. **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested.”** You have ignored God and rebelled against him; but you want to come home to Him to experience His life changing power. **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested.”** These verses have a lot to say, but one thing is clear. Jesus is saying, “Here is your chance for a ‘do over.’ Here is your chance to be forgiven and to receive once and for all God’s approval, acceptance, and the power to begin a transforming work in your life. If you have not admitted your wrong doing toward me, then simply admit it. Ask me to forgive you and I promise I will once and for all justify you.” Let’s pray together.