

Righteousness Revealed

Romans 3:21-26

John Breon

As we've been working through Romans, we've seen that God created a world and created people in God's image to share God's glorious rule of the world and partnership with the rest of creation. God's own character, kindness, and generosity are the basis for our life with God. That's good news.

We've also seen Paul demonstrate that no one is righteous before God. All of humanity became alienated from God through sin. That's bad news. None of us is naturally in a right relationship with God.

A Sunday School class of young children was misbehaving. The room was noisy and chaotic. Some adults went to see what was going on and a little girl came out and said to them, "We're being bad, and we don't know how to stop"

(www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/august/1081511.html). Is that your experience? Have you ever felt that way?

Paul goes on to talk about how we can come back into a right relationship with God—how we can be justified by God. This is good news and it's the story of what God does to put us right and restore us.

People who are serious about God and aware of their sin want to know how to be right with God. Sometimes the problem then is that we try to get right with God by ourselves instead of receiving God's gift of a right relationship. There are two common ways people try to get right with God. Neither of them works. One is the *sentimental* approach. This notion says that God loves everybody too much to judge anybody. Everyone and everything will turn out all right. This sees God as kind of a cosmic grandpa. We might say, "Your god is too nice." The problem with this approach is that it doesn't take God or sin seriously enough.

The other approach that doesn't work is the *legalist* way of thinking. This is a bank ledger mentality where we put all our good deeds, reputation, and effort in a column against our bad deeds and hope we wind up "in the black." We hope that in the end our good efforts outweigh our

bad. We could call this the “Boy Scout” approach. Now, I admire the Boy Scouts and Eli is an Eagle Scout. But if we take the method of earning merit badges and being accepted and promoted based on how many badges we earn and apply that to relationship with God, we’re missing the point.

Not only does that not work, it doesn’t make anyone really happy—how can you be happy when you’re always adding up your religious score? How do you know when you’re finally good enough? And, that was the mentality that crucified Jesus.

Something like that legalist view is what Paul had to deal with—in himself and in his Jewish contemporaries. Paul says that no one is declared righteous—or justified—no one gets right with God by observing the (Jewish) law. The law makes us aware of sin, but it can’t make us right with God.

But now God reveals his righteousness in Jesus the Messiah. And God has a gift of righteousness for people. God’s righteousness here is God’s covenant faithfulness to the promises announced to Israel. It’s God’s saving justice. By revealing this righteousness in Jesus, God provides a right standing for everyone who has faith in Jesus.

The words *right/righteous/righteousness* and *just/justify/justification* are related. They translate the same family of Greek words. To be just is to be right and to do right. Justification means to make right. Justify is courtroom or covenant language for pardon, forgiveness, release, being accepted as part of God’s family.

This is something God does *for* us. We don’t *get* right with God. God *puts us right* with himself. God forgives our sins, pardons us, restores the broken relationship, and makes it a right relationship.

All of this is based on what God did for us in Jesus the Messiah. One way Paul describes what God does in Jesus is *redemption*. This word was used in the Greek world for the price paid to ransom prisoners of war or to buy a slave’s freedom. In the Old Testament it refers to buying back slaves or land. The OT also uses redemption to describe God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt or exile in Babylon. Jesus is *the* Redeemer. In grace, God sets us free from the bondage of sin by giving his Son for us.

Among Christians in Africa, their word for redemption means "God took our heads out." When slave trading was practiced and Africans were being carried off into slavery, each one had an iron collar buckled around his or her neck and the collar was attached to a chain. Sometimes a relative or friend would see someone who'd been captured as a slave and would offer a ransom for the captors to remove the collar and free the person. That's where their word for redemption came from: "God took our heads out."

Of course, enslaved people in America rejoiced over their redemption declared in Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. They joined many others grieving when Lincoln died. One story from that time comes from one of the cities where Lincoln's casket was carried in a procession through the streets. An African American woman stood on the curb and lifted her little boy as high as she could above the heads of the crowd. As she held him there so that he could see, she was overhead to say, "Take a long look, honey. He died for you" (Maxie Dunnam, *This Is Christianity* 49, 50).

Take a long look at the cross and see your Redeemer who died for you, who takes you out of bondage, who sets you free from sin and death, who liberates you from everything that would keep you from God and keep you from being who God wants you to be.

So redemption is one way Paul describes what God in Christ has done. Then he writes, "God presented Jesus as *a sacrifice of atonement*." Imagine two Israelites under the Old Covenant bringing their sacrifices to the temple. One is wealthy and leads a prime heifer. The other is poor and brings a bird for his sacrifice. As they approach the priests, the wealthy man notices his poor neighbor. And though it's not his nature to be proud, almost before he can stop himself, he's thinking, "I'm bringing a prize heifer as an offering and my neighbor is bringing just a bird. I must be more spiritual. God must be more pleased with me." And the very thing that God intended to unite the community divides the people. So God makes a new covenant and says, "I'll provide the sacrifice myself. My own Son will die on a cross and I'll create level ground beneath it." No more heifer, no more bird. Jesus the Messiah is the sacrifice for our sins. He's the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world (see Bob Tuttle, *Sanctity without Starch* 97).

In Jesus, Passover and the Day of Atonement meet and merge. God offers us deliverance and forgiveness through the faithfulness of Jesus in his death and God's own faithfulness in raising Jesus from the dead.

The term "sacrifice of atonement" translates the word for the "mercy seat." That was the lid of the ark of the covenant where the priest would sprinkle the blood from a sacrifice for sin. It was the place of God's presence where Israel's sins were forgiven. Forgiveness of sin through the sacrifice of an innocent victim was seen in a temporary and limited way in the temple. But God has revealed and made real such forgiveness in a full and final way through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God gave Christ as the means of forgiveness of sin, finally and forever (James Edwards, *Romans*, *New International Biblical Commentary*).

Somehow, through the sacrifice of Jesus, and his blood shed for us, we're pardoned and forgiven. At the cross God deals with sin so that we can become part of God's forgiven family that includes believing Jews and believing Gentiles. God found a way to remain just and holy and, at the same time, to justify or put right, sinners who would put their faith in Jesus.

A woman came to see the famous plastic surgeon Dr. Maxwell Maltz. She told the doctor that her husband had been injured while attempting to save his parents from a burning house. He couldn't get to them. They both were killed, and his face was burned and disfigured. He gave up on life and went into hiding. He wouldn't let anyone see him—not even his wife.

Dr. Maltz told the woman not to worry. "With the great advances we've made in plastic surgery in recent years I can restore his face."

She explained that he wouldn't let anyone help him because he believed God disfigured his face to punish him for not saving his parents.

Then she made a shocking request: "I want you to disfigure my face so I can be like him! If I can share in his pain, then maybe he'll let me back into his life. I love him so much and want to be with him. And if that's what it takes, then that's what I want to do."

Of course, Dr. Maltz wouldn't agree, but he was moved deeply by the woman's determined and total love. He got her permission to try to talk to

her husband. He went to the man's room and knocked, but there was no answer. He called loudly through the door, "I know you're in there and I know you can hear me, so I've come to tell you that my name is Dr. Maxwell Maltz. I'm a plastic surgeon and I want you to know that I can restore your face."

There was no response. Again, he called loudly, "Please come out and let me help restore your face." But again there was no answer. Still speaking through the door, Dr. Maltz told the man what his wife was asking him to do. "She wants me to disfigure her face, to make her face like yours in the hope that you will let her back into your life. That's how much she loves you. That's how much she wants to help you!"

There was a brief moment of silence, and then slowly the doorknob began to turn. The disfigured man came out to make a new beginning and to find a new life. He was set free, brought out of hiding, given a new start by his wife's love.

That's a dramatic expression of human love that gives us a faint picture of the saving love of God in Jesus Christ (Dunnam 59-61).

What are we going to do with love like this?

The best thing to do is admit we need this love and receive it. An artist sculpted a statue of Jesus in prayer. One of his friends complained that he couldn't see Jesus' face. The artist replied, "To see his face you must be on your knees." We need to be humble enough to give up trusting our own righteousness, our own efforts, our own ability to get right with God. We need to be humble enough to trust God.

Because we receive this grace through faith. Faith brings us to repentance, which means to change our attitude. Faith and repentance bring us to conversion. Faith and repentance are our response to God's grace. But they're not "what we do" in contrast to "what God does." Faith and repentance are gifts of God. They're not works we do to gain God's favor. Faith and repentance put us in an attitude of openness, humility, and trust before God. They allow God the opening to bring his grace into our lives. God offers a gift. Faith and repentance are the act of receiving the gift.

Christian speaker and author Tony Campolo tells about meeting a man on an airplane. The man was sad and depressed. He looked like he'd

forgotten how to laugh. Tony asked if there was anything he could do to help. Throughout the conversation, Tony felt like he was being led to say the things that needed to be said.

The man opened up and began talking about what he was feeling, or actually, how he was unable to feel very much at all. Realizing the man's problem was deeper than he could handle, Tony referred him to a friend of his who was a therapist and counselor. The man agreed to go see Tony's friend.

A few weeks later the man called Tony. He was grateful for how the therapist was helping him. He wasn't out of his depression, but he was discovering some of its causes. He went on to say that the therapy was doing some very good things for him, but he needed something more. He wanted to talk to Tony about that.

The next week, Tony was in the man's city and they got together for a meal. The man was ready to hear what Tony had to say. Tony told him about Jesus and what Jesus had done on the cross. He talked about Jesus taking the penalty for our sin, about how Jesus can get into our lives and cleanse us from sin.

Tony told him that, in some mysterious way, Jesus on the cross could invade his heart and mind, and absorb out of him all the dark things about himself that he'd come to recognize and confess during his counseling sessions. He talked about what God provided through the cross of Jesus and how we need to receive what God provides. He told the man that if he would yield to Christ, Jesus would absorb out of him all the sin and guilt that were weighing him down.

He explained:

Because Jesus is God, when He hung on the cross two thousand years ago, He could see and experience [you and me right here right now]. And at this very instant, if you will let Him, He will absorb into His own body and personality everything about you that is sinful. All your guilt will be drained out of you. Like a sponge, He will absorb it. Like a magnet, He will at this very moment pull out of you and into Himself all the sin and guilt of your life as though they were iron filings. You

can be cleansed and freed from all this spiritual junk that has weighed you down and destroyed your enthusiasm for life.

Tony began to pray with the man. And the man prayed, "Jesus, You know my sins, and I know my sins. I want to be released from them. Please take them. I beg You."

When they finished praying, the man was changed. He was radiant. He just sat silently for a minute. Then he began to say over and over, "Thank you!"

Tony said, "You're welcome." But the man said, "Oh, I wasn't talking to you. ...There is an incredible lightness to me. I feel like I want to run and jump. There's a happiness I'm feeling that is about to explode."

We come to that kind of experience in different ways. For some it's sudden; for some it's gradual. But there's always surrender involved. Coming into new life in Christ happens when we consciously acknowledge Jesus as Lord of all life. It means letting go. It doesn't happen because we're willing to do something for Jesus, but because we're willing to let him do something for us (*Carpe Diem*, ch 16).

Faith is "letting go." In Jesus, at the cross of Jesus, God shows himself to be righteous, just, faithful. In the resurrection of Jesus, God shows the power of his love and faithfulness. Are you willing to trust God and allow him to help you let go and receive the gift of forgiveness and new life God offers in Jesus Christ through God's Spirit here and now?