

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH FAITH

Romans 3:21-31 (Key verse:22a)

“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

The message is based on the book of Romans chapter 3 verses 21 to 31. Key verse is verse 22a, and it reads, This righteousness is given through faith to all who believe.

In the previous sections, Paul made it clear that people cannot be made right with God neither by their personal works of merit or by obedience to the law. In fact, he declared that everyone was under the wrath of God saying, There is no one righteous, not even one and that no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. God is righteous, and in Him there is no darkness. We learned through Ivan's message that God abandoned Christ on the cross because Jesus had become sin for us. This means that God cannot associate with sin. God only accepts perfection, He only accepts His own righteousness, and the only way for people to be accepted by God, is if they became perfect and bore the righteousness that He requires. In today's passage, Paul addresses the most foundational doctrine of the Christian religion: the doctrine of justification. He answers the question, “How can a sinful people be made right before a righteous God?” He does this in the following manner: He introduces the righteousness of God. He explains how this righteousness is given and to whom. He also describes how this righteousness was made possible, and finally, he describes the effects of this righteousness.

Let's look 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. So far, our study of the book Romans has been quite morbid and melancholic. We have been talking about sin and about how much humans, by nature, deserve the wrath of God and that God cannot accept them since they are not perfect. We understand that we are under the wrath of God and that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves righteous before Him—we are in dire and desperate need for righteousness. It is at this point that the apostle Paul introduces the righteousness of God. He says that this righteousness is made known apart from the law. This righteousness does not originate from the law, it is the righteousness of God: this means that God is the source of this righteousness. Amen! This righteousness is therefore unique, in that it comes from God and God must be pleased with it. It follows from there that God will accept whoever comes to him bearing this righteousness. Paul also says that the Law and the prophets testify to this righteousness. What does that mean? That means this righteous is not some idea that Paul came up with. (He did not think, “Oh! Perhaps I was a little extreme in my description of their sinfulness. Let me then give them some hope, some lifeline to hold onto, as it were. No!) This righteousness was foretold by the prophets and even in the Torah. We heard from Silence's message that God foretold through the prophet Isaiah that the iniquity of us all was laid upon Jesus. This is the righteousness that Paul introduces, the righteousness from God, which pleases God and acceptable to Him, which He Himself foretold. This is the kind of righteousness we need to stand before God and we should desire. Amen! Now, how can we receive this righteousness?

Let's look at verse 22a This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Firstly, this righteousness is given. This means that those who receive this righteousness did not have it in the first place- it does not become revealed in them or they are suddenly made aware of it as though they were previously ignorant of it in themselves. This righteousness is outside of humans, it is given like a robe to wear and it covers the wickedness of man before God. This is what is called the imputed righteousness- where God treats Jesus as though he lived our wretched lives and treats us in turn as though we lived the perfect life of Christ by virtue of our faith in Him. Secondly, it is given through faith to all who believe. What do we mean by faith and what is to believe? Faith that is used here is not some mental willpower or some strong sense of hope that things will improve. It's not the same thing as saying, “My faith in people has been restored” when we see someone do something nice. This is much more than that. What Paul is talking about here is saving faith, the faith that leads to salvation. Amen! This faith does not come from within a human being, it is not conjured up from one's heart or imagination. It is a supernatural faith that is given by God which He produces in the heart, and only by this faith can one appropriate the righteousness of God. Amen! For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). God is the one who grants this faith with which we may receive the righteousness. Now, the idea that

God makes available this righteousness and that faith is required to receive it is okay, but to say that God must also give the faith required may be a little strange to most of us. It is utterly opposed to our most basic and immediate logical purview. We are used to working for things, we practice quid pro quo, or something for something. It sounded reasonable to say that I should bring the faith and that God would then reward that faith with the gift of righteousness and life. Clearly this is at odds with the scripture; God makes available the righteousness and He also grants the faith required to obtain the same righteousness. If we understand what Paul was saying before this section, especially that (no one is righteous, not even one. There is no one who seeks God and there is no fear of God before their eyes.) if we understand the nature of man that Paul is describing here, we can easily understand that unless God intervenes, we will not have this faith. If God does not give this faith, no one would receive the righteousness and no one would be saved. We can therefore agree with that prayer of Augustine, "Give me the grace to do as you command." God must be the one to give us the faith.

I thought this was a difficult topic to explain. I imagine that someone might be sitting there thinking, "So, if the faith must come from God, what do I do if I don't feel like I have it? Do I just wait and hope for the best? Do I despair? What is the point?" To you we say, "Seek the LORD while He may be found." He is faithful and He hears and answers prayers. Be on your knees before the throne of Grace and beseech Him for the gift of faith. Jesus promised in John 6:37-39, 37 All that My Father gives Me will come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will most certainly not cast out [I will never, never reject anyone who follows Me]. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but to do the will of Him who sent Me. 39 This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but that I [give new life and] raise it up at the last day. This is the promise of God, that if we come to Him, He will not cast us out. Even when we ask Him for the gift of faith, surely He will give to us the same. Amen! To those of us who already rejoice in these things, let us continue to be encouraged and empowered to serve God all the more. Let us take heart in the fact that not everything rests on our shoulders, that we don't have to justify ourselves before God. Let us only continue to prove the reality of our faith by displaying soundness of understanding, by loving the brethren and by pursuing holiness and righteousness for the glory of God. Finally, this righteousness is given to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. These verses emphasize the fact that this righteousness is made available to all, regardless of whether they are Jew or Gentile. I want to add here, that it does not matter who you are or what you have done, or what lifestyle you have had. The righteousness of God is available for all of us. Jesus Christ, by His redemptive power is able to justify us before God, so that we may be acceptable to Him and bear His righteousness. Let us therefore once more be encourage to come to the throne of Grace and beseech the most merciful and kind God to look upon with favour and to grant us this faith which leads to this righteousness that pleases Him or at least to give confidence that indeed we have this faith and we are made right before Him. Amen!

Now, how and why was this righteousness revealed?

Let us look at verses 25 and 26, 25 God presented Christ as 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— 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. Jesus Christ is the sacrifice of atonement. On the cross, justice meets mercy—by punishing Jesus on the cross, God is able to forgive sinners because He counts their sins as being punished in Jesus Christ, i.e. the sins of the believers are imputed onto Christ on the cross and are punished by God in Jesus. They who trust in Him receive His righteousness in return. In that way, God's righteous judgement is achieved and he is then able to be the justifier of the wicked without becoming Himself unjust. Jesus Christ is the way through which this righteousness was made possible, without Him, God would be unjust to forgive anyone their sins.

Finally, what are the results or effects of this righteousness?

Let's look at verse 27 to 31, 27 Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. 28 For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. 29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, 30 since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. 31 Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. Firstly, this righteousness of God should result in humility. This is because, the righteousness is received by faith. As Jonathan Edwards would put it, "You contribute nothing to your salvation except

the sin that made it necessary.” We come as we are to receive the righteousness of God by faith in Christ and this should always leave humble, even when we see real positive changes in our lives. We should therefore not be too critical of others who are either not yet in the faith or those that differ with us in opinion on certain secondary matters. We are supposed to be most loving, most courteous and most generous as Christians because everything we are and everything we have we received for free. As Paul says elsewhere, 7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? (1Cor 4:7). Secondly, this righteousness should promote unity in God. There is one God who justifies all, regardless of differences in peoples, and we must desire to seek to be united with such as confess the same justification with us. Finally, the righteousness of God upholds the law. Jesus walked rightly before God and He kept the law and fulfilled all its requirements. So, by placing our faith in Him, we trust in His works in the law that He has kept it on our behalf. By faith, we say to God, “We cannot keep the law because of the remaining corruption, but we trust your Holy One to keep it in our place.” In this way, the law of God is not set aside or nullified, rather it is upheld. Amen!

In conclusion,

The doctrine of justification teaches that even though we are hopeless sinners who cannot do anything to earn God’s favour, God made it possible by sacrificing Christ on the cross so that by believing in Him, we may be declared righteous before God. This declaration is external and forensic, it is not brought about anything that we have or offer on our side. We become righteous by believing in Jesus and trusting that by His death on the cross, our sins are imputed to Him and that His righteousness is imputed to us. Thus, when God looks at us, He sees righteous and forgiven sinners. In a certain sense, and with right understanding we may say we are simultaneously righteous and sinner until we become glorified when we go to heaven or upon the return of Christ should he come while we stay this life.

This is a glorious and wonderful doctrine which requires understanding in its fullness so that it is not divorced from its intentions. For example, there was a popular idea in the evangelical world some time ago. What was called, “Once saved always saved.” In such a view, people carnally sought to hold onto the justification by faith apart from works while divorcing their Christian lives from holiness and actual righteousness. Such people would say that they are saved and yet would live lives that are utterly against the law of God, living in sin without repentance and so forth. Doing what is described as using the grace of God for lasciviousness or as a licence to sin. This is not what this doctrine seeks to promote, it is supposed to give us a position from which we may be motivated to pursue actual holiness and righteousness in our lives with confidence, knowing that by these (by these works) we are not trying to make ourselves right before God, but we simply seek to honour His name for justifying us, and making us right with Him. Amen!

Finally,

The idea here is not to promote a justification by works or a faith that is without works. We are justified by faith in Jesus apart from works, yet this faith that justifies must necessarily lead to good works. It must express gratitude to God who justified the sinner- it must say, “Because of what you have done, I will live to honour you.” May the God of love and peace bless each one of us and help us to walk rightly with Him even as we seek to apply this doctrine. Amen!