

# POTOMAC HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Rev. David V. Silvernail, Jr.

November 14, 2004

## *“The Grace of God in the Gospel”*

### A Series on Romans

## Romans 3.21-26, *“The Heart of the Gospel”*

### INTRODUCTION: *“Grace is Radical”*<sup>1</sup>

We talk about grace a lot here at Potomac Hills. I talk about grace a lot.

I probably talk about grace more than I practice it. As do you.

We talk about grace so much that it’s become familiar. It’s become the norm, the routine, the regular, the common. And when that happens, we forget the truly radical nature of the grace of God.

For that reason, I want to begin with something I said in the very first sermon I preached here at Potomac Hills. My first Sunday in the pulpit here was on January 12, 1997 (yes, it’s been that long). And on that Sunday, to a congregation of about 40 people, I said the following ...

Grace is one of those words we easily take for granted. We use it routinely and often when speaking of spiritual things ... or we use it another way entirely ... like saying “grace” before a meal, or saying “she was a graceful person” ... to the point where we get used to it and no longer think about it.

And that’s a tragedy. Because Grace is just another word for the Gospel, the Good News, the Message of Jesus Christ. And that’s the greatest need in our life, whether we know Christ or not. In fact, the Apostle Paul once said, **Acts 20:24**, *“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”*

It’s hard to understand just how important this idea of grace really is. How many of you here, you don’t have to raise your hands, but just think about it ...

How many of you here would consider yourself as good in God’s sight, what the Bible calls **righteous**, as Billy Graham? Sort of hard to put yourself on the same level as Billy Graham, isn’t it?

How many of you here would consider yourself as good in God’s sight as John Calvin? That would be even tougher than Billy Graham since John Calvin’s ministry changed an entire nation.

How many of you here would consider yourself as good in God’s sight as the Apostle Paul? That would be tougher than Billy Graham and John Calvin put together, especially since most people regard Paul as the greatest Christian who ever lived.

How many of you here would consider yourself as good in God’s sight as Christ Himself? Now that sounds like it borders on the blasphemous.

But because of Grace ... it’s true!

---

<sup>1</sup> A small part of the introduction is adapted from The Grace Awakening by Chuck Swindoll, pages 42-43. The quote by Donald Grey Barnhouse comes from his commentary, Exposition of Bible Doctrines: Volume III, God’s Remedy, page 6.

If you are a Christian ... if you have received Christ as your Lord and Savior ... if you are “in Christ,” then you are as good in God’s sight as Christ Himself! Because if you are “in Christ” then when God looks at you He sees the perfect goodness ... the perfect **righteousness** ... of His Son Jesus. You see, when Christ died on the cross He took all of our sin upon Himself and put all of His righteousness on us. We received Grace, because we got what we didn’t deserve, the righteousness of Christ.

Now let’s imagine you have a six-year old son whom you love with all your heart. Tragically, one day you discover that your son was horribly murdered. After a lengthy search, the investigators of the crime find the killer.

You have a choice.

If you used every means in your power to kill the murderer for his crime, that would be **vengeance**. If, however, you’re content to sit back and let the legal authorities take over and execute on him what is proper – a fair trial, a plea of guilty, a conviction, and capital punishment – that would be **justice**. But if you should plead for the pardon of the murderer, forgive him completely, invite him into your home, and adopt him as your own son ... **that would be grace**.

Now do you see why Grace is so hard to grasp and so hard to accept?

Very few people, **if any**, who hear this, would happily and readily do that.

**But God does it every day!**

He takes the guilty, believing sinner, someone just like you and me who says, “I am lost and confused, unworthy, guilty as charged, and undeserving of forgiveness,” and extends the gift of eternal life because Christ’s death of the cross satisfied His demands against sin, namely, death. And God sees the guilty sinner, who comes to Him **by faith alone ... as righteous as His own Son**. In fact, He even invites us to come home with Him as He adopts us into His forever family. Instead of treating us with vengeance or executing justice, **God extends grace!**

Friends, this is the **most powerful life-changing truth I know!**

And it is spoken of most clearly and most deeply in the most powerful book of the Bible – **The Book of Romans**.

The church in Rome existed in a world much like our own. It was a broken world, full of misery, immorality, and injustice. The world was under the crushing heel of Rome, and Rome was ruled by Nero, a cruel and insane emperor. Nero was known for his political treachery, gross immorality, and insane cruelty. He persecuted Christians with incredible tortures and the most painful deaths one could devise. He lived to break people.

And into this bloody, perilous, cruel world ... a world where the church was staring into the face of incredible hardship and suffering ... a world where everyone was broken ... came striding the Apostle Paul. He sent ahead of him this powerful letter – the epistle to the Romans. Often called the fifth Gospel because it’s about Christ ... but where the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of Romans bears witness to **the life-changing power of Jesus Christ!** And the most powerful passage in the most powerful book is **Romans 3:21-26**.

I’ll be using both the New Living Translation and the English Standard Version today. I’m going to read first from the New Living, a meaning for meaning translation, and then later, as we go through the passage, I’ll be reading from the English Standard, a word for word translation.

**Romans 3:21-26**, *“But now God has shown us a different way of being right in His sight—not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. [22] We are made right*

*in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. [23] For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. [24] Yet now God in His [grace] declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. [25] For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed His blood, sacrificing His life for us. God was being entirely fair and just when He did not punish those who sinned in former times. [26] And He is entirely fair and just in this present time when He declares sinners to be right in His sight because they believe in Jesus.” (NLT)*

The great Presbyterian preacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, colored a red heart over these verses in his Bible because, as he later wrote, and I quote ...

“Over the paragraphs which we are now about to study, I had drawn a heart; and in my notes I said that this passage was not only the heart of Romans, but the heart of the New Testament and the heart of the whole Bible.

I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the whole Bible. Understand them and you will understand the whole Bible. Fail to comprehend their true meaning, and you will be in darkness concerning most of Scripture.

For here is the revelation of the being of God and the nature of His being;

Here is the revelation of sin and of the depths of sin;

Here is the revelation of God’s righteousness and the infinite demands and provisions of that righteousness;

Here is one of the keys of human history and the explanation of much that happened before the time of Christ, as well as the revelation of the principles that were to prevail in God’s dealings with men since Christ;

Here the mouths of those that would slander God because of His free pardon of sinners are closed forever;

Here is the vindication of the nature and character of God, righteous in all that He does.”

And so it is from Dr. Barnhouse that Romans 3:21-26 has earned the nickname, “The Heart of the Gospel.”

As you know, if you’ve been paying **any** sort of attention over the last two months, the Apostle Paul didn’t begin the book of Romans in chapter 3, verse 21. The first few pages of Romans are strong stuff. Romans is sort of a good news/bad news letter, and Paul gave us the bad news first.

The bad news is that we’re all sinners, we’re under God’s judgment, and we’re helpless in our own strength to erase the guilt and sin from our lives. From Romans 1:18 through 3:20, Paul relentlessly drives the bad news home: *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* **Romans 3:20** thunders to all of us very loudly, *“For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what His law commands. For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.”* (NLT)

The bad news is this. You’re not good enough, and left to yourself, you’ll never be good enough. This dynamic presents a dilemma for both God and man. From the human point of view, how can we as such profoundly corrupt beings ever be made righteous in the sight of God?

But now for the good news. Divine justice demands the condemnation of mankind, yet divine love wants to reach out to the guilty human race. Given this great dilemma, God comes up with “The Miracle of Righteousness.” God’s total answer is sufficient for man’s total failure.

These verses are certainly the turning point in Romans, and they could be the turning point for each of us as we study this passage.

What is the miraculous arrangement whereby profoundly corrupt sinners can be made just before a holy God? God has seen you at your worst, and yet His first words to us are “I Love You.” When you received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you received the grace of God. You were **justified**, that is, you were declared righteous in God’s sight. Grace makes you right.

This is possible for several reasons, stated consecutively in our text. The first is in verse 21, where we see that the miracle of justification is possible because a special righteousness exists separate from the works of the Law.

And so we begin in ...

**v. 21: GRACE IS DESCRIBED**<sup>2</sup>

**Romans 3:21**, “*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—*

What is this righteousness apart from the works of the Law like? Specifically, this righteousness is not a legal righteousness, but is rather a status of righteousness before God which comes to us as a gift. It is infinitely beyond human righteousness. It is a radical righteousness.

Paul says in verse 21 that it “*the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it*”

The Law pointed to this perfect righteousness as man kept falling short of the Law’s commands. The Law’s insistence on having sacrifices kept reminding men that their good works, their works of righteousness, would never be good enough. The Old Testament prophets witnessed to this radical righteousness by direct statement — for example, **Isaiah 45:24**, “*Only in the Lord ... are righteousness and strength.*” The Law and the Prophets bear witness to this righteousness apart from the Law.

“But now,” Paul writes ...

“**But now**,” there is a righteousness that is good enough.

There is a man who deserved eternal life simply by the way He lived.

There is one man who kept the Law perfectly, in fact, He fulfilled the Law.

He lived the perfect life.

He had perfect works.

He never fell short of the Law’s commands.

He was just like us, but without sin.

We know Him as Jesus Christ.

The greatest display of this radical righteousness was of course the life of Christ. Jesus is the radical righteousness of God! As Paul says in **1 Corinthians 1:30**, “*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*”

What does the existence of this radical righteousness apart from the Law mean to us? Everything! Our radical corruption, so clearly spelled out earlier in Romans, precludes any hope of making it by our own works. But the existence of a righteousness apart from works gives hope to us. Moreover, the hope is equally offered to everyone. Jesus Christ is the perfect

---

2 The exposition of the text is adapted from an old message of mine, “*Grace Makes Us Right*,” 1/12/97; the message, “*The Only Way to be Right with God*,” by Ray Pritchard, 3/29/92; *Preaching the Word: Romans* by Kent Hughes, pages 81-87; and *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8* by John MacArthur, pages 197-220.

righteousness of God.

And this perfect righteousness comes to us, not by the Law, not by our own works, but merely as a gift.

Gifts are not earned, gifts are not deserved, **gifts** are merely received.

And so we see in ...

#### v. 22: **GRACE IS RECEIVED**

**Romans 3:22**, *“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:”*

The key to having the righteousness of God is **faith**. The redundancy of the opening line of verse 22 emphasizes this, *“through faith ... to all who believe.”* In **Philippians 3:9**, Paul talks about this even more, saying, *“in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes **through faith** in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends **on faith**.”*

**Romans 3:28** says it with great clarity, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”*

The key to receiving this righteousness from God is that it comes to us by faith. When Martin Luther translated this verse into German he felt the sense of it so strongly that he added a word to it – **“alone.”**

**Sola Fide – By Faith Alone.** The great cry of the Reformation.

You can't earn it, you don't deserve it, you merely receive it ... **by faith**.

The righteousness of Christ is available to all who believe. That's what faith is ... believing. Not doing, not deserving, not earning ... simply believing.

What does this mean to us? Again the answer is ... **everything!** As radically corrupt sinners, we rise from helplessness to hope when we see that a righteousness exists apart from the Law. And our hope is solidified when we see that our righteousness comes through faith.

**Everyone who believes will have it!**

Justification is possible because God's righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Considering the depths of our sin, there is no other way any of us could make it!

Because it's obvious that ...

#### v. 23: **GRACE IS NEEDED**

**Romans 3:23**, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*

Paul's forthright statement here underlines what we've been saying. Our own righteousness is of great importance in human relations and shouldn't be minimized, but **it does not** produce God's salvation. The ethical moralist and the sexual immoralist both fall short. Paul reduces the best that any man can do to zero. There is no distinction.

As we saw from chapter 1 through chapter 3, Paul relentlessly drove the bad news home – *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* There are no exceptions ... none ... period. No one is good enough.

One theologian said that “the prostitute and the murderer fall short, and so do you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine shaft, and you stand at the top of the mountain; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they are.”

So you see, we all are without excuse before a Holy God. We're all in need of help. We have nothing in us to make God accept us apart from Christ. Sin is a big problem. It brings death. And you're a lot worse than you think you are ... and so am I. But God's grace is much

greater than we think it is. And so our only answer is to be found there.

**Thank God** that verse 24 follows verse 23 and we can know that ...

**v. 24: GRACE IS FREELY GIVEN**

**Romans 3:24**, “*and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus,*”

God’s Grace is free. It’s a gift. It’s already been paid for by somebody else. That’s what redemption is. It’s a legal word that means “to buy back.” It was used in the slave markets to refer to purchasing a slave’s freedom. When you paid the price for that slave in order to set him free, then you had “redeemed” him.

We were slaves to sin and under the sentence of death. But Jesus Christ paid the price, in His own blood on the cross, to purchase our freedom from sin and our release from the sentence of death. It’s free; you don’t have to pay for it, **because Jesus already did**. You don’t deserve it; it’s given to you by His grace.

And finally we see ...

**v. 25-26: GRACE IS PRESENTED**<sup>3</sup>

**Romans 3:25-26**, “*whom 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. [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.*” (ESV)

The key to God’s making this righteousness possible is found in the term “sacrifice of atonement.” God presented Christ as a “sacrifice of atonement.” The New Living translates this very clearly, “*For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us.*”

Literally, most of that translates one word - “**propitiation**.”

That’s a big sounding theological word, but it’s a critically important one. It’s a word that we can’t live without. And it basically means two things ...

First, that Christ’s death covered over our sins. **They are forgiven**. They are wiped away ... done with ... gone.

And second, that Christ’s death fully satisfied the wrath of God. God demonstrated through the death of Christ that His hatred of our sin is just as real as His forgiveness of our sin. God didn’t let sin go unpunished. He waited until the right time, the time of Christ, to direct toward Himself, in the person of His Son, the full weight of the wrath we deserved. At the cross, God poured out every ounce of His anger and hatred of sin that you and I deserved so that His justice is totally satisfied; except that **Jesus took it for us**. That’s why, if you are “in Christ,” **then there isn’t any wrath left for you**.

The New Century Version translates this part of verse 26 like this, “***God did this so He could judge rightly and so He could make right any person who has faith in Jesus.***”

F. F. Bruce, one of the most prominent New Testament scholars of our time, points out that the word “propitiation” is used twenty times in the Greek Old Testament to denote the golden cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, the place where the priest sprinkled the blood of sacrifice to satisfy or appease God’s just wrath on sin.

In using this symbol Paul had several things in mind. He remembered that the mercy seat

---

3 F.F. Bruce’s explanation of “propitiation” comes from his commentary, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, pages 104-107. The duties of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement can be found in Leviticus 16.

was the place where God manifested his *presence* in Israel. God said to Moses, **Exodus 25:22**, *“There I will meet with you, and from **above the mercy seat**, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”*

Paul also knew that God manifested His **glory** at the mercy seat. On the Day of Atonement when the priest entered the Holy of Holies, it was necessary that a cloud of incense cover the mercy seat so he would not die.

Most of all, the apostle remembered that the priest had to sprinkle blood seven times on the mercy seat to make **atonement** for God’s people and to turn away God’s wrath at their sins. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments, and the ceremony portrayed the fact that a broken Law stood between a holy God and mankind. But through the shedding of blood this place of judgment became the place of reconciliation. **Hebrews 9:12** tells us that *“Once for all time He [Christ] took blood into that Most Holy Place, but not the blood of goats and calves. He took His own blood, and with it He secured our salvation forever.”* (NLT)

In Christ’s death the demands of God for justice against a sinful race are fully met, leaving Him free to be merciful to those who formerly merited only judgment. Christ is our mercy seat.

Christ made possible our righteousness. Why he did it is outlined in the remainder of verses 25 and 26. Simply put, in the past God did not pour out His full wrath on men for their sins. He was patient and merciful. Some might question His righteousness in doing this. However, in Jesus’ death He demonstrated His wrath against sin.

It is here — in Christ being the mercy seat — that we see the miraculous love and creativity of God. God found a way to forgive us and yet maintain His moral integrity. He forgave us without condoning our sin. How? By directing toward Himself, in the person of His Son, the full weight of the wrath we deserved.

Thus God’s holy character is not compromised.

The God of the bible is both just and merciful.

God’s Justice and God’s Mercy meet at the Cross.

That’s the Heart of the Gospel.

And all who believe it said, “Amen.”