

Justification by Faith Alone --- Romans 3:21-24

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Introduction

Romans 3:21-24. *21But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.*

There is a 35-mile-long canyon that links Estes Park with Loveland, Colorado. On July 31, 1976, there was a furious thunderstorm that produced what is called the Big Thompson Flood. The flood produced a 19-foot wall of water that roared through the canyon and killed 129 people.

A wife who lost her husband to the flood wrote this account of her husband: "Gary was an engineer. To his trained eye, the narrowness of the canyon and the rapidly rising river spelled trouble. He told me that he was going to our friends' cabin to warn them to leave at once for higher ground.

Although I asked to go with him, Gary insisted that I stay in the hotel. He said that he would be back for me, but if he didn't return in thirty minutes, I was to climb to the top of the mountain without him. He said he would catch up with me there. At the hotel where we were staying, he told the hotel owner and his wife to be sure to get their two children, an 11-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl, out of bed and dressed right away. Then Gary drove off.

In exactly 30 minutes, I followed Gary's instructions and started to climb up the rough, rocky side of the mountain. The canyon down below was now filled with water. I saw the tops of cars bob by; even a Greyhound bus was swept past. I saw the hotel where we were staying break up and float away. The hotel owner and his family disregarded Gary's warning and were all killed."

The warning of imminent disaster and death was clear, and the offer of the way to be saved was clearly understood. There certainly was enough evidence to take the warning seriously. The hotel owner and his wife did

not believe the warning, so they did not act. They had to suffer the consequences of their disbelief.

In retrospect, we can all see the foolishness of those who rejected this man's warning. Sadly, many who have been warned of the judgment of God and the way of salvation will reject that warning to their own demise because they did not believe. God has warned mankind of judgment and informed him of salvation through His Son for centuries. God is a gracious God. He has provided a way for salvation through great expense to Himself, through the death of His Son.

In the book of Acts, when the Philippian jailer asked what he must do to be saved, Paul concisely answered, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*" Salvation is received by faith alone. It has nothing to do with ceremonies, rituals, doing good works, or any external acts of righteousness of any kind.

If there is any one truth that Satan desires to undercut and distort, it is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. If Satan can cause confusion and error in regard to salvation, he has succeeded in keeping men in their sin and under judgment. I have said it before: Every false religion of the world— whether liberal Christianity, a highly developed pagan religion like Hinduism, or simple animism—they are all founded on some form of works salvation. Without exception, they teach that man can become right with deity by attaining righteousness in his own power, by his own good works.

Conversely, the One True God has always required faith in order for a person to be saved. The believers in the Old Testament were saved by faith, just as believers are in the New Testament. For example, Abel had little revelation concerning God compared to us, but he believed in the truth that he knew of God at that time and was saved. Noah also had limited knowledge about God, but he too had faith in the truth that God revealed to him and was saved. Moses had considerably more revelation of God's nature and will, and by trusting in what he knew, he was saved. All of these men were justified and counted righteous through faith in God. The same is true for us.

Our text this morning focuses on the contrast between trying to be good enough to go to heaven, on one hand, and on the other hand, being made right before God by faith in Jesus. They are mutually exclusive.

The heart of the Old Testament was the veil in the temple that separated man from God. Man was kept away from the presence of God by the fact that he was a sinner. No one could approach God without a bloody sacrifice for sin. The high priest could only go into the Holy of Holies twice a year to sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice.

But when the Lord Jesus died, the veil in the temple was ripped from top to bottom and the way was open for anyone, Jew or Gentile, to come into the innermost presence of God. The tearing away of the veil was the tearing away of the law. The righteousness of God was now to be possessed apart from law by trust in the person of Jesus and what He accomplished on the cross. This morning we focus on justification by faith alone.

Review

Last week, we considered a primary doctrine in all of Scripture; namely, justification. We saw that justice is built into the fabric of our existence. Woven into the fabric of our being is the reality and understanding of justice. The Bible teaches clearly that there is coming a great day of justice in the great courtroom of God. This day of judgment is a grave and solemn reality. All rebels against God will appear in this court: there is no getting away, no escape. The Bible teaches that all of mankind that appear in that courtroom will stand utterly and absolutely guilty on that day.

Romans 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

Hebrews 9:27 And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.

The rebellion of man and the justice of God are the necessary backdrops of the good news concerning Jesus Christ. We saw that the church has as much responsibility to warn men of impending judgment as they do to preach the love of God. In fact, the death of Christ as an expression of the love of God would have no meaning if there were no reality of judgment.

The concept of salvation presupposes that there is a danger from which people need to be saved. If they are saved, they are saved from

something that threatens them; in this case, it is the consequences of their own sin. We cannot speak of the love of God apart from His righteous justice.

Psalm 9:7-8 But the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne for judgment, and He will judge the world in righteousness; He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.

We saw that in order to have a healthy understanding of the book of Romans, you must have a firm grasp on some of its main words. These are words that appear often in the pages of Scripture. Sin, salvation, faith, justification, propitiation, redemption, substitution, adoption, and born again are just some of the important words used. These words are like sections in an unbreakable chain.

We considered that the first word that we must understand as we move forward in Romans has to do with the great courtroom of God. It is the word "justification." Some form of the word "justify" or words associated with justification appear over 60 times in the book of Romans. That is because the primary theme is how to be made right with God so as not to enter His heavenly courtroom.

We saw that justification has everything to do with the guilt of sin being removed from the believer. The end result is that the believer is made perfect. A right understanding of justification is absolutely crucial to the whole Christian faith.

Justification refers to this. Justification is a courtroom declaration in which God regards your sin and counts it as paid for and forgiven, and Christ's righteousness is placed upon you (or imputed to you) so that you are declared as righteous as God in His sight.

We saw that this legal, courtroom facet of justification is found in many portions of Scripture ---

Romans 8:33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies. (Satan, the law, your conscience--no one can bring a charge against those who are justified.)

Romans 8:1-4 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [There is nothing left for which to blame you. There is no

basis for accusation. Why?] *2For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

That is the heart of justification. The requirement of the law has been fulfilled in us because we are in Christ. We saw that those who are justified will never see the courtroom of heaven so as to be judged. Jesus said in John 5:24, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”*

Justification by Faith Alone

So we come to our text this morning, and we find that words addressing righteousness and justification appear eight times from verse 21 through the end of the chapter, in 11 verses. Paul takes up the great theme of righteousness by faith, apart from the law. It is the theme of Romans. It is the theme of the New Testament. God's righteousness imputed to man by faith, apart from the law, is a primary theme of the whole Bible.

This theme involves God making sinful man as righteous as Christ, so that man doesn't contaminate heaven and so that God remains righteous. This righteousness is apart from the law or any of man's attempts at being good. This righteousness is apart from man deserving justification. This righteousness is given by God's grace because it is God's nature to be merciful, gracious, and compassionate. So we consider two truths concerning justification: 1) Justification Is Apart from the Law; and 2) Justification Is Through Faith.

Only Christianity states that man can do nothing for God but that God has done everything for man. There is no in-between. You are either trusting fully upon yourself and your goodness, or you are trusting fully upon Jesus and His finished work on the cross. I believe many people who fall under the umbrella of Christianity live frustrated lives because they attempt to mix their own works with God's finished work.

Justification is Apart from the Law

*But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested,
being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.
Romans 3:21*

I told you last week that this righteousness apart from any good deeds of man has been clearly taught in the earliest part of the Old Testament and has been a main theme in all of Scripture. Paul makes clear that this message of justification by God's provision and imputed righteousness started from the beginning and has been consistently taught throughout the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles. Paul declares that justification apart from the law has been "witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

For example, concerning the law, I told you before that when God gave the law, God also gave the lamb. At the same time God gave the provisions of the law which expressed His righteousness, He provided an altar and a substitute where blood would flow. Mankind could see that salvation could not be the result of keeping the law's demands. Man could only be made right with God by relying upon the provision of the substitute which God commanded and provided. God had a very specific goal in mind as he set up the perfect law and then the sacrifice for sin when the law was broken.

You may recall in your schooling the study of Pavlov and what I remember as "Pavlov's dogs." Pavlov did extensive study in what is called "conditioned reflex." He took a small puppy from its mother and began to feed it under very special conditions. Every time the dog was given food, a certain bell was rung. Month after month, the dog would only be fed after the bell was rung.

Normally, when you give food to a dog, its mouth salivates in preparation for the food. We know this sensation ourselves. We can smell something cooking or even just think of a nice, juicy steak or some kind of baked bread or a favorite salad or desert (right now some of your mouths are watering just thinking about what I just said). Normally, a dog does not salivate unless he is given food.

But, Pavlov conditioned this dog for months with the bell and food; and so while his students looked on, Pavlov rang the bell without placing any food before the dog. The dog immediately began to salivate. So Pavlov demonstrated, to some degree, how outside influences have a definite

physical effect on a person.

God gave a clear, consistent example to the Jews by giving a kind of “conditioned reflex” in the law so that mankind can understand that righteousness cannot result from man's attempts at being good. He designed the law and the sacrifices in such a way that every time a man sinned, there came to his thinking that there had to be a sacrifice. The sinning person brought a lamb to the priest and placed his hand on the head of the lamb, confessing the fact that he was a sinner. Then the priest took the animal over to the altar and killed it in the presence of the sinner.

Similar to the pattern of thought that Pavlov established “bell means food, bell means food,” so also God established in the minds of His people, “sin means death, sins means death.” Sin means your death or the death of a substitute. God gave the sacrifice as a picture of Christ. Apart from good works, there is justification. Ezekiel 18:4 *“The soul who sins will die.”*

So the law bears witness to the truth that righteousness comes, not by attempts to keep the law, but by God's grace through a sacrifice. Furthermore, Paul states that the prophets also bear witness to this truth. There are many portions of the Old Testament prophets that we might consider that bear witness to this justification by faith through the grace of God.

One of the most penetrating passages is Psalm 51. The New Testament refers to King David as a prophet. Here in Psalm 51 is David's heart being laid bare for all to see for all of time. He essentially ordered the execution of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. He impregnated Bathsheba in his adultery. He was confronted with his sin by the prophet Nathan, and having been confronted, he made no excuse for his sin, saying, *“I have sinned.”*

Following is Psalm 51, which is David's confession of sin and appeal to God for cleansing. I have made a few comments along the way concerning righteousness apart from good works.

Psalm 51

For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

1Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to

the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. [Notice right away David approaches God on the basis of God's grace, not his own efforts.]

2Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

3For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

4Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.

5Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me.

[David does not attempt to downplay his sin. He admits that he needs cleansing. He points to the fact that the greatest aspect of his sin was against God, even though it involved many others. He points to the fact that his sin nature was already present at conception. David does not mean that physical intimacy is sinful.]

6Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.

7Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. [This hyssop is a reference to blood sacrifice. The priest used the hyssop bush to make a utensil by which he sprinkled blood on that which was to be cleansed. David understands that only the death of another can make him clean and wash away his sin.]

8Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

9HideYour face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

10Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

11Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

12Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.

13Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You. [None of David's pleas mentions his past goodness or his attempts at keeping the law. He simply pleads for grace. It is only God that can restore him and justify him.]

14Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.

15O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. [Having repented, David is showing full trust that God will restore him, and that he will in turn be able to speak to other sinners of God's grace.]

16For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering.

17The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. [David makes clear that outward religious acts are not what God seeks. The issue of the heart is always the point with God. Brokenness over sin and a contrite heart before God are what God desires. Only after brokenness and repentance does substitution take effect.]

David abandons any thought of righteousness in himself and comes to God's altar to receive righteousness on the basis of God's grace through a substitutionary atonement. The same is true for us today. So many portions of the prophets speak of justification by faith apart from the law.

Obviously we could spend the rest of the morning considering Isaiah 53, concerning the Suffering Messiah. *Isaiah 53:3-6 He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face. He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. 4Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. 5But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. 6All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.*

So justification is not a new doctrine. It was foreshadowed and foretold in the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets bore witness to this truth. *"But now . . ."* points to the fact that historically, in time, it has been fulfilled in Christ. *2 Timothy 1:8-10 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

So the Law and the Prophets bear witness to the fact that you will die because of your sin because God is a holy and just God. But there is a way out. The Lord has provided for a substitute; the lamb of God will die in your place, and that brings us to the next verses . . .

Justification Is Through Faith

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.

Romans 3:22-25

In these verses, we are introduced to terms and thoughts that are not just foundational for Romans, but in all of Scripture; terms like faith, justification, redemption, grace, and propitiation.

Before we continue, I need to read for you a quote from James Boice that is so insightful. Boice writes, "In Romans 3:21-31, we are dealing with themes that are the very heart of the entire Bible and therefore of reality itself. In all life and history there is nothing more important than these teachings. But who today thinks this way? Who is willing to acknowledge this in an age when abstract thought—indeed, even thinking itself—is suspect? Who even among the masses of Christian people really appreciates what Paul is saying here? Ours is an age in which people are self-absorbed and focus on immediate gratification. We tend to evaluate any religious teaching according to its apparent relevance to our present 'needs' and short-term goals."

Do you see what he is saying? He is saying that we are losing the ability to think deeply concerning truths that matter, and unless we perceive that what is being said will help us in the next few hours or days, then it is not relevant. But we have bought into a lie because in reality, our lives are very short and then we stand before God. At that time, there will be nothing of relevance other than the truths that we consider right here.

These are weighty matters which we consider here. As Boice said, there is nothing in all of life and history that is more important than these teachings.

22Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

I told you before that the Gospel involves the very righteousness of God. We have seen that man's righteousness cannot even begin to be compared to God's righteousness. They are not even in the same category. But this

very righteousness of God is imputed to believers through faith.

Generally, when a person first hears this fundamental truth of Christianity that being made right with God is utterly apart from human effort and is only through faith, they usually are repulsed and turn away in disgust. Man must have a part in saving himself. We do not want a religion that demands that we throw ourselves entirely on the grace and mercy of God. Only Christianity humbles man by declaring that there is nothing at all you can do to work for your salvation.

What is faith? That is a vital question. Trust, confidence, faith, and belief are all synonyms in this regard. No matter what you call it, faith is simply acting upon the word of another. I told you when we first began our study of Romans that hundreds of times a year, you act upon the word or the action of people whom you do not even know and in many cases whom you have never seen.

For example, you go to a restaurant and you put into your mouth food that you did not see as it was prepared. You are trusting that what it says on the menu is what you are eating, when in reality, you do not know what is in that burger, pizza, or Chinese food you just ate. You go to a doctor whom you do not know, and let him take a knife and cut into your body, trusting that he knows what he is doing. You take medication that you trust will affect you in the way that it is intended.

You are acting on faith, trust, belief, and confidence every step along the way. It is obvious that you believe because of your actions. If you had doubts or did not trust the person, your actions would demonstrate what you truly think.

In the realm of spiritual realities, faith is simply acting upon the Word of God. He tells you that you are totally depraved, dead in your sin. You believe it not only because of what you know to be the case in your heart and mind and in your own experience, but more than that, because of the revelation of God in His Word. He tells you that He came to die for you because He desired to demonstrate His love for you. He tells you that He put your sin on Christ and crucified Him in your place. He tells you that He raised Jesus from the dead as proof that His payment was sufficient for sin because the wages of sin is death. He paid the wage of sin in full because death no longer had power over Him.

I told you before of the missionary John G. Paton who went to the South Pacific islands in 1858. He began to translate some of the Gospel stories into the natives' language. However, when he began the task, he discovered that there had not learned a word for the term "faith" or "confidence" or "trust." So he committed his efforts to finding some term that would contain the concept of faith and trust.

He tried to start discussions that would bring up such concepts and words. The natives knew that he was seeking for something, but they could not imagine what it was. After some time of frustration he took a break and went on a hunting trip with one of his helpers. They shot a deer-like animal and several smaller game and started to carry their kill back to the house of the missionary.

The intense hot weather of the South Pacific was oppressive and the hike was grueling to get back to the house, so they were exhausted when they arrived. They dropped their heavy burden, and then threw themselves down on the cool grass to rest. The native said, "Oh, it is good to put down your burden and stretch yourself out here on the grass."

John Paton instantly and excitedly told his helper to repeat over and over the comment that he had just said. He ran and wrote it down in his book; and when the Gospels were translated, this was the phrase that was used to convey the idea of faith and belief. For example, Paton translated John 3:16 in this way, *"God demonstrated His love for the world in this way, that He gave His only, unique Son that whoever stretches himself out on Him, shall not die, but have everlasting life."* He translated Acts 16:31 *"Stretch yourself out on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved."*

Paton worded Romans 10:9-10 *"If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and in your heart stretch yourself out on the fact that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person stretches himself out, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."*

The picture of dropping and letting go your incredible burden of sin and letting go your attempts to be good before God and stretching yourself out on the Lord Jesus Christ, fully trusting, fully resting upon Him and what He has done—that is the picture of salvation by faith alone.

The question arises, "Why did God chose faith as the means by which we receive justification?" The answer is this: Faith is the one attitude of the heart that is the exact opposite of depending on ourselves. When we come to Christ in faith, we essentially say, "I give up. I will not depend on myself or my own good works anymore. I know that I can never make myself righteous before God. So, Jesus, I trust you and depend on you completely to make me absolutely perfect before God."

So faith is the exact opposite of trusting in ourselves, and it is the attitude that perfectly fits salvation by grace and not by our good works. This is why the Reformers were so strong on justification by faith alone, and not by any other works.

Romans 4:16 *For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace.*

Ephesians 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Conclusion

Christ has died so there is righteousness without works, righteousness without law, righteousness without human effort, righteousness imputed and infused only on the basis of faith in the grace of God demonstrated in Christ.

What is vital to you is not so much whether you understand or know all the Old Testament prophecies concerning salvation by faith alone, but whether the change they speak about is a reality for you. You may not know much theology. Terms like "justification," "propitiation," and "redemption" may just be vague concepts to you. But you know what your life has been. You remember your past sins. You are aware of your failures. You may say, "I was like the person described in the first two and a half chapters of Romans. But that was before." *But now*

God knew your life from beginning to end and saved you in light of His full knowledge of everything you would ever do. It was never, is not, nor ever will be an issue of your performance.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones suggests that the following explains the essence of the Christian position and are one way by which you can test whether or not you are a true Christian, and by which you can reassure and strengthen yourself if you are:

“When the devil attacks you and suggests to you that you are not a Christian and that you have never been a Christian because of what is still in your heart or because of what you are still doing or because of something you once did---when he comes and thus accuses you, what do you say to him? Do you agree with him? Or do you say to him: 'Yes, that was true, but now . . . '?

Do you hold these words against him? Or when, perhaps, you feel condemned as you read Scripture, as you read the Law in the Old Testament, as you read the Sermon on the Mount, and as you feel that you are undone, do you remain lying on the ground in hopelessness, or do you lift up your head and say, 'But now'?

This is the essence of the Christian position; this is how faith answers the accusations of the Law, the accusations of conscience and everything else that would condemn and depress us. These are indeed very wonderful words, and it is most important that we should lay hold of them and realize their tremendous importance and their real significance.” (Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25*, p. 27)