

Romans 3:21-26 – “The Rest of the Story”

If you were to start someone out reading the book of Romans who didn't know anything about Christianity, you'd be fortunate if they got past Chapter 2. Because what Paul does in the book of Romans is start with this black backdrop of humanity to reveal our utter depravity and sinfulness. It's a lot to take in and can be quite depressing. And many may just give up in hopelessness before they get to the rest of the story.

- Ever had someone tell you a story and you're on the edge of your seat thinking that it's going to end in complete horror or tragedy before hearing the rest of the story?
- I remember a pastor at a conference one time sharing how he had fallen into an inappropriate relationship and was trying to hide it. Eventually a staff person found out and confronted him. He knew he had to break it to his wife. He was driving home and was sick to his stomach. [I'm listening to this thinking, is this pastor confessing a grave sin in front of hundreds of pastors – and Chuck Smith in the front row!]. He continued on sharing how he pulled into his driveway, got out of the car and crumpled on the front lawn in a tearful mess feeling like he's just lost his family, and his ministry, all over a stupid indiscretion. Then he said, and then I woke up! It was all a dream!! I was like, dude, you could have started with that!
- The rest of the story is important. And sometimes we can miss the rest of the story of what God is doing or what He has already done because we get caught up in the agony of failure or shortcomings. Or perhaps, we just stop looking into what He has already provided.
- So today we're going to look at a very familiar passage, a very familiar verse that we often repeat, but perhaps fail to hear the rest of the story.

So turn with me to Romans 3. We're going to look at verses 21-26.

Outline:

1. Revealed Righteousness – 3:21
2. Received Righteousness – 3:22
3. Required Righteousness – 3:23
4. Redeeming Righteousness – 3:24-26

Martin Luther wrote in the margin of his bible that Romans 3:21-26 was:

“the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle [to the Romans], and of the whole Bible.”

Leon Morris calls it “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written.”

I pray you recognize the magnitude and depths of glorious truth we’re going to review this morning.

But before we see the heights of what God has done, we must remind ourselves of the pit that we were all once in. A pit that we couldn’t climb out of, a pit that kept us separated from God. It was the pit of our sin.

Now upon hearing this, some may begin to say, wait a second, I’m not that much of a sinner. I’m actually a pretty good person. You should check my track record. I go to church, I do charitable work, I’m a really nice person. But Paul brings receipts. He takes the first 3½ chapters to point out that there is nobody who is right with God by their own doing. He deals with three groups of people: the pagan, the moralist, and the religious. All of humanity is represented in one of these groups and it’s like he brings them into a court of law – God’s court – to bring their case against them. And the Judge brings the gavel down on the bench with the pronouncement: Guilty!!

- **Romans 3:19**, *"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God."*
- Now this is not comfortable. But remember, there’s more to this story...

So the general summary that Paul comes to after putting everyone on trial is seen in **Romans 3:9–12**, *"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. ¹² They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one."*

Do you see that? There is none who does good. Seriously, not even one! I know you’re thinking here, but I’ve done good. I’ve helped a friend move. I typically let people in front of me when they’re merging on the highway. I served at Vacation Bible School. I’ve certainly done good! You’re right, those are good things. But those aren’t things that make up for your sin and guilt before God.

What Romans is pointing out is that if you're trying to be right with God by your own moral or religious living, you're never going to make it.

That's depressing, isn't it? But that's not the end of the story – praise God! There is an answer!

And Paul with great excitement can't wait to share it. This whole paragraph is written in the Greek as one long sentence. There's no periods or breaks. It's as though Paul couldn't wait to get this good news out.

1. Revealed Righteousness – 3:21

3:21 - *But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,*

I love Bible 'buts'. And this is a big but. These buts often reveal where there seems to be a dead end, where there seems to be a human impossibility, God steps in to do the impossible. "But God". These two words are our lifeline.

And this **but** reveals that though we are guilty; though the law actually condemns us, there is a righteousness offered from God, and it is exclusive of the law.

- This righteousness is not speaking of the attribute of God, speaking of the fact that God is righteous. Rather it's addressing the righteousness that is given to us by which we now have a right standing with God. It's apart from the law.
- The law was given to show God's standard of goodness. A standard we could never reach. The law is good in that it revealed our sin and pointed us to our need for a Saviour.
- This has all been ***witnessed by the Law and the Prophets***. This speaks of the whole Old Testament. The very Scriptures stand as a witness of this plan of God to make people righteous before Him apart from the law. How so?
- Abraham stood as an example of one who believed, and it was accounted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).
- Habakkuk 2:4 said that the just shall live by his faith – not by the law.
- **Isaiah 53:11**, *"He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities."*

2. Received Righteousness – 3:22

3:22 - *even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;*

This was not a 'Plan B' God put in motion as He saw humanity struggle to keep the law. The law again was given to put guardrails around humanity. It was there to show God's standard, but it was never the means to save people.

Salvation and a right standing before God would come ***through faith in Jesus Christ***. We'll see how exactly in a moment.

But notice, this has been offered to all who believe. God doesn't play favorites. He's not an exclusive God, He's very inclusive. He's made the way available to all who believe and put their trust in Jesus.

Now notice those words – ***there is no difference***.

We can easily compare ourselves to others and think, I'm way better than that person. That person has committed crimes, or has road rage, or is just not a very kind person. I'm none of those things, I'm way better! But the problem is you're comparing yourself to the wrong standard. When God looks down on us, there is no difference between you and Mark Carney. I know that may sting a little.

- Bishop Handley Moule put it dramatically: 'The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of it [sc. God's glory]; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they.'¹

This is why Paul says next...

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

3. Required Righteousness – 3:23

We've all broken God's law. If we break one part of it, it's as though we've broken the whole thing (James 2:10). God has every right to throw the book at us.

We've fallen short. I know a thing or two about coming up short. It's not fun. But what does it mean to fall short of the glory of God?

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¹ Stott, J. R. W. (2001). *The message of Romans: God's good news for the world* (p. 109). InterVarsity Press.

We were created in the image of God. We are to reflect the glory of God – which speaks of His splendor and majesty. It's the outward display of His attributes. We're to share that same splendor as we grow in Christlikeness. But our sin keeps us from doing so.

But it doesn't have to be this way. There's more to the story...

- You see, Romans 3:23 is one of the more well-known verses in the Bible. We repeat it often to show the condition of humanity and reveal our guilt. But I wish Romans 3:24 was repeated as much as Romans 3:23.

4. Redeeming Righteousness – 3:24-26

3:24 - *being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

This right here is gold! This is good news. This is the other side of the story. Though we were guilty sinners separated from God, we have been ***justified***!

We're going to look at a few Christianese words in this passage. But let's take some time to break them down. Because you may have heard them many times before, but perhaps you've never paused to really understand them.

Being ***justified*** (*dikaioō*) means that you are now seen as righteous. It's a word we have to tie into a court of law. It's a legal term, like when the judge brings down the gavel and declares, 'not guilty', that's this word! You are declared righteous.

- It's not meaning that you are becoming righteous, it means you are now seen as righteous. God's not waiting for you to get better before He declares you righteous, He's already declares it!
- Some break this word down as: 'just-as-if-I-never-sinned'. Wow!

And it's been given ***freely*** – without charge. We can't expect to repay Him for it.

- So many people think of their walk with God as trying to pay Him back. But there's no charge on our account. He's taken us out of the debit column to the credit column.
- The Greek word for freely is *dōrean*. It's also used in **John 15:25**, "*But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'*"

And this is how our verse could be properly rendered, we're justified without

cause. We deserved none of it.

- It's all by His grace. Grace is getting that which we don't deserve. But He showed this unmerited favour towards us simply because of His love and goodness.

Now what was free for us was not free for God. This justification came with a price, it came ***through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus***.

We're brought from a legal term to now a commercial term.

- This would have been a familiar term in Paul's day when there were millions of slaves in the Roman empire. People would become a slave to pay off a debt. But someone could come along and pay the price that slave owed and set them free.
- Do you know what we owed? The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). So Jesus came and paid that debt, in doing so, He has redeemed us. We have been purchased at the cost of Jesus' own life and have now been set free from the bondage and condemnation we were under because of sin.

3:25-26 - *whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

One more big Christianese word to look at. And this is an interesting one. God set Jesus forth as a ***propitiation***. Justification is legal term; redemption a commercial term; propitiation is a religious term.

Romans 1:18 says that *"the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..."*

- We deserved the wrath of God because of our sin. So how can the wrath of God be revealed and His righteousness also be revealed. How does God show mercy yet carry out justice?
- The answer is provided here. Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice. His blood was shed, in doing so the wrath of God was satisfied. Jesus took our place and absorbed God's wrath against our sin.

Interestingly, this word propitiation means mercy seat.

This was the lid of the ark of the covenant. It was the very place that the high priest would enter in one day a year and sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice upon it.

It was at this mercy seat where God said, “It is here I will meet with you” (Exodus 25:22).

- Above the mercy seat was the presence of God. Under the mercy seat sat the ten commandments – the demands of the law. The law by which no one is justified. But between the presence of God and our guilt sat this blood stained lid – God’s mercy and justice were reconciled by the blood of a sacrifice.
- Today, it’s no longer a lid where we find mercy – it’s the Lord. The cross of Jesus has become our mercy seat and it’s where God’s justice and mercy are reconciled. And it’s all so we can be justified and come freely and innocent before our God and enjoy His presence and peace.

We’ve seen here today that the defendants are all implicated in their sin. We’re the defendants – we’re all guilty. But then the verdict comes forth saying we can all be made righteous. That’s not really just. This doesn’t fly in today’s courts if the judge is good. We have a problem in that the judge is now implicated as corrupt because a good judge wouldn’t let the guilty go free. But this is why God is **just and the justifier** of all. He allowed His Son to pay the penalty in order for us to be made righteous. Only God could find a way to fulfill both His justice and show His grace, mercy and love at the same time.

The beginning of Romans leaves you sitting in the stand – guilty. No difference between you and anyone else you’d like to compare yourself to. If the story ended there it would be a very depressing ending.

But it doesn’t end there: “But now the righteousness of God is revealed!”

- You are **justified**! You’re not on your way or paying off your debt – you are declared righteous right here right now through faith in Jesus.
- You are **redeemed**! Your debt has been paid at a price you could never afford.
- You have a **mercy seat**! It’s here where God’s justice and His love meet. Not in conflict but in harmony by what Jesus has done for you.

That’s the rest of the story.

If you’ve never put your trust in Jesus Christ, the invitation for you today is to believe. It’s not try harder, or clean yourself up, it’s believe that He is God who has come to save you. A right standing with God is given through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe.

Don't let Romans 3:23 be the last word over your life. Let it move you to Romans 3:24 – where you are justified freely and forever at peace with God through Jesus Christ. May that not just be the rest of the story but the beginning of a new one for you today.