

JUSTIFIED BY HIS GRACE AS A GIFT

Romans 1-4 Review

Focus: 3:21-31

Key Verse: 3:23-24, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Do you like to receive gifts? That seems like an easy question to answer. Think of Christmas gifts or birthday gifts. We love them! But sometimes we feel burdened to receive a gift, since we wonder if there are strings attached. Will I owe that person something in return? Do I have to give something back? Is it truly free?

Last spring we studied Romans chapters 1-4 for 12 weeks. If you were here, do you remember any of the lessons or sermons? I hope so. Among the sermons, we learned about being “gospelized” and dropping the idea of keeping a scoreboard of our lives. So how can I condense or summarize 12 sermons on four chapters into one lesson or sermon? That is indeed a challenging task! This message has 3 parts: (1) the righteousness of God introduced (1:16-17), (2) those whom Paul indicts (1:18-3:20), and (3) the gift (3:21-4:25). The third part will require a bit of unpacking, for it is indeed a gift.

First, the righteousness of God introduced (1:16-17).

Apostle Paul, before his conversion, was a Jew of Jews, and a hater of Christians. He worked hard to arrest and terrify Christians. He even approved of the stoning death of Stephen, the first recorded Christian martyr in the Bible. The Risen Jesus appeared to Paul in a blinding light, and called him into his service. From that time on, Paul lived as a follower of Jesus Christ, consumed and propelled by the amazing, marvelous and wonderful grace of Jesus. He wrote: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1Cor 15:10). Listen to Paul’s love for Jesus, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

This Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome. Paul’s letter to the Romans has powerfully impacted Christianity and even world history to this day. Saint Augustine was converted to Christianity through verses in Romans 13. Just wait til we get there. But I want to focus on a verse in chapter 1 that introduces the righteousness of God, which powerfully affected a German man named Martin Luther. It is verse 17, yet let’s read

from verse 16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (Rom 1:16-17).

Here Paul mentions the gospel, or good news, which Paul says is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. This gospel is for all people. Now look at verse 17 again. For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith” (1:17).

I want to read a quote of Martin Luther based on this verse, which changed his life: “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ ” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith...Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.” (Luther's Works, Volume 34, P336-337, <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/8742/when-and-how-did-martin-luther-arrive-at-the-justification-by-faith>, accessed 9/11/26)

The gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ gave Luther new life. So Paul has introduced us to this righteousness of God, or righteousness from God. But before he unpacks it, he indicts several groups of people as under the wrath of God.

Second, those whom Paul indicts (1:18-3:20).

From 1:18 Paul speaks of the “wrath of God” revealed from heaven against godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth. What is the truth that they suppress? God created all things. But we creatures don’t worship and thank God. Rather, our thinking becomes futile and our foolish hearts become darkened. We easily fall into sexual immorality and idolatry, worshiping created things rather than God our Creator. This is the first group of people that Paul indicts or brings under God’s judgment: the pagan world, which denies or ignores God.

Last week at our church picnic I spoke with a man who said he used to be very active as a proponent in the LGBTQ community. He said he boldly proclaimed hatred toward God and knew he was living in rebellion against God. But through his Christian sister’s prayers and witness and godly life in Christ Jesus, which was different from the world, he came to faith in Jesus Christ. Now he has a mission, together with his sister, to reach

people in the LGBTQ community with the good news of Jesus Christ. What a beautiful and amazing testimony of God's grace in Jesus Christ!

The next group of people that Paul indicts are moralists who judge others (2:1-11). They are quick to find fault with others. And pointing out others' sins and failings makes them feel better about themselves. There is only one big problem: they are not actually better, since they commit the very same sins that they judge in others. Their problem is relativism and self-righteousness. They think they are righteous since they compare themselves with worse sinners, like criminals. God's kindness is to lead all people to repentance. And when a person refuses to repent, they only store up God's wrath and anger. Listen to Paul in 2:8-9, "but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek" (2:8-9).

Next Paul indicts the Jews, that is, religious people who should know better (2:21-23): "you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law." Paul is addressing hypocrisy here. A hypocrite is one who looks good outwardly to people, but in private, or in other circumstances, becomes a different person. They give the appearance to others that they are good, righteous people, but they too are just as sinful in their thoughts and words, if not in their actions.

Have you felt condemned or convicted yet? If not, listen to Paul's conclusion (3:10-12): "¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

And again (3:19-20): "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

The law of God is good. But it only tells us what is right and what to do and not to do. It doesn't empower us to do good or to avoid sin. The law simply helps us to know that we are all sinners, accountable to a holy, sinless, perfect God.

Third, the gift (3:21-4:25).

Paul now brings us back to the righteousness of God, which he introduced in 1:17. Look at 3:21-24:

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Let's unpack this marvelous gift in five words: manifested, justified, redemption, propitiation, and grace.

First, manifested. Manifested means to be made known, or revealed. God revealed this righteousness of God in the person of Jesus Christ—his life, death and resurrection. Jesus lived a beautiful, sinless life of loving God and loving people. Jesus revealed to us true righteousness, that life that we all should live and should have lived. He lived the life we all yearn in our souls to live. He died the death we could only dream of dying. He loved with a love we all hope to have one day.

Second, justified. To be justified means to be proven right. We all love to justify ourselves, even our stupid behaviors. We want people to understand why we are not so bad, but are actually quite good. We say, “I didn’t intend to hurt or offend anybody. After all, I’m only human. And, there are many worse people than me.” Sound familiar? Justifying ourselves doesn’t make us right. Rather, it makes things worse. It’s like a criminal trying to cover their footprints or fingerprints after a crime. It doesn’t erase our mistakes or sins. But in Jesus Christ, by putting our faith and trust in him, accepting him as our Lord and Savior and King, God says, “You are right! I accept you!” John 1:12 says, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right [or power] to become children of God.”

Third, redemption. Jesus gives us redemption. This was a term used in the slave trade. If a slave was redeemed, it meant his freedom was purchased. A price was paid and now he is free. Jesus paid the price to free us from slavery to sin and condemnation. Jesus paid the cost of our ransom to set us free from the devil’s condemnations and our guilt. We are no longer guilty when we stand before God on judgment day. Hallelujah, we are free!

Fourth, propitiation. This is a tough word. It means “averting the wrath of God by the offering of a gift.” It refers to the turning away of the wrath of God as the just judgment of our sin by God’s own provision of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. (From “Propitiation”: an essay by Ligon Duncan, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/propitiation/>, accessed 9/11/26.)

It's helpful to look at the three times "propitiation" is used in the New Testament:

Romans 3:25a says, "whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith." In pagan religions, an angry god had to be appeased with some kind of offering from people. This is different, because God provided the offering. God put his Son Jesus forward to turn aside God's righteous wrath. God himself paid the price, taking the punishment we deserve. God paid the fine, which we owe and could never pay, through Jesus Christ, to all who believe.

Next, 1 John 2:2 says, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Jesus takes the punishment through his death on the cross for all people of all time and places who believe in him. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29).

Finally, 1 John 4:10 says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." Jesus is God's best love letter to us. God does not hate us. God so loved the world that he gave Jesus Christ to die in our places, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life (Jn 3:16).

Fifth, grace. Grace is a gift. It cannot be earned. We don't deserve it. We simply receive it with thanks and love. We are justified. We are redeemed. Jesus took our punishment. Acts 10:43 says, "To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Have you accepted this free gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ, who died for you? Have you accepted this love in Jesus Christ? Jesus shields us from the coming wrath and judgment that we deserve, since he took it himself. Through Jesus Christ, we are justified, forgiven, redeemed and made new. We are children of God by his grace. This is the gift of God. If you have received this free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, when is the last time you told someone about it and offered it to them in Jesus' name?

Remember: it is a free gift that God offers to all, to be received by faith in Jesus Christ. Is God the God of Christians only? Is he not the God of non-Christians too? Yes, of non-Christians too, since God will give this free gift to all who receive it in faith.

In chapter 4, Paul introduces two men in the Old Testament who were justified and made righteous by their faith, not by other means like circumcision or keeping the law: they were Abraham and David. When I came to Bible study as a college freshman and studied Genesis, I was surprised to see that Abraham was not a perfect man. He lied about his wife. He took a concubine to bear a child. David was even worse: he committed adultery with another man's wife and then had him killed to cover it up. Jesus' disciples were not much better: they argued about who was the greatest; Peter

denied Jesus three times out of fear. Seeing these imperfect men in the Bible surprised me, and at the same time gave me hope, that God could use and forgive me.

I grew up going to church. I prided myself that in high school I didn't drink, smoke or sleep around like many of my peers. I thought this made me righteous, or at least better than others. Of course, I had my own sins of arrogance, lust, condescension, disobedience, stubbornness, and the list could go on and on. In fact, I could mostly relate to the Pharisees of Jesus' day, the religious guys who claimed to know God. I went to church and was even an altar boy. Actually, at age 10, I wanted to be a priest. But that dream gradually fell away to follow more worldly pursuits, first to be a medical doctor and then later it changed to study engineering in college. My lustful desires caused me to violate a few girls' purity and I had a foul mouth when I came to college, things I am not proud of. I knew in my heart that I was not a righteous man, even though I looked pretty good to people. One girlfriend was impressed for a short while that I went to church. She broke up with me when she found I wasn't much better than other non-church-going boys. Through Bible study in this church, God led me to the living hope and a new life and dream and purpose to serve Jesus Christ. This is God's grace to me.

Do you acknowledge that you are a sinner and your own righteousness won't save you? Do you admit that you are self-righteous and hypocritical, just pretending to be much better than you really are? Confess and renounce your sins, and receive Jesus Christ as God's free gift of grace. Through Jesus Christ the righteousness of God is manifested. Through Jesus Christ we are justified, redeemed and saved from the righteous punishment that we deserve. Through Jesus Christ we can receive this free gift of grace—forgiveness of sins and a new life in Jesus' name. May we all receive God's free gift of grace in Jesus Christ and offer this gift to others in Jesus' name.