
“The Just & Justifying God”

ROMANS 3:21-5:21

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AT A GLANCE

This sermon revisits the heart of the Gospel: we are all sinners, unable to save ourselves—but God, in His grace, justifies us through faith in Jesus. Our salvation isn’t earned; it’s a gift.

Like Abraham, we are called to a faith that fully trusts God’s promises. This faith not only secures our eternity but transforms our present—giving us peace, hope, and strength in trials.

No matter how great our sin, God’s grace is greater. You are fully loved, fully forgiven, and fully secure in Christ. Amen?

INTRODUCTION

This is our second week of our five-week recap of the book of Romans, having just recently concluded a 2 ½ year exegetical study of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Last week we revisited man’s fundamental problem: none is righteous, no not one. Man has a sin problem. And the answer to that is not the Law.

The Law was given to reveal our problem, not solve it. No, the solution to our problem is nothing we can work ourselves. It had to come from outside of us. If Romans 1:18-3:20 reveals man’s problem, Romans 3:21-5:21 reveals God’s solution to man’s problem: justification by faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. This is what makes the Gospel “good news!”

ROMANS 3:21-24

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

JUSTIFIED BY GRACE

Let’s begin with the assertion that we are **justified by His grace**. This is a legal declaration, a pardon for iniquity. A release from the debt of sin and guilt. But it is not simply a clerical decision, it is a legal decision, a just legal decision based on the fact that our sin guilt has been paid for. This is what is meant by propitiation in verses 25-26.

Verse 25-26 ²⁵whom 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. ²⁶It 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.

Propitiation is the removal of guilt after it has been atoned for by Christ’s death on the cross. This is more than simply “wiping away” our sins. That is known as “expiation,” which certainly does happen as a result of Christ’s death. But propitiation reveals something more about our salvation. Propitiation is the appeasement of God’s wrath toward the sinner on the basis of Christ’s death. Not

only is your sin-debt removed from you (expiation), but so too is God's wrath toward you removed (propitiation).

THE ORIGINS

And we should pay careful attention to the origin of Christ's propitiation: Paul says, **whom God put forth**. Your salvation, from start to finish, from concept to completion, was wholly God's idea and God's work. This allows God to be both **just and the justifier**. This allows God to be righteous and holy, and at the same time forgiving, justifying the one who **receive[s] it by faith**.

In **Romans 3:27-31** Paul then moves to the practical application of this doctrinal truth, asking in **verse 27, "What then becomes of our boasting?"** In other words, what have you done to contribute to your salvation? Nothing! Paul continues in **verse 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

No one is going to be saved because they earned it by doing religious works, or obeying the Law. James, who many have pitted against Paul, echoes this truth, *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."* *James 2:10* The standard for law-keeping is perfection, not *close* to perfection. Thus, if we find ourselves being free of God's judgment, it is clearly not because of our law-keeping. It is solely by His grace.

In 4:1-8 Paul takes us all the way back to the origins of the Jewish faith, Abraham, to establish that faith came before the Law and indeed justification was always by faith. **Verse 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."**

Paul contrasts the one who supposedly works for righteousness by following the Law with Abraham, which would be absolutely scandalous to a Jew in Paul's day. They identified themselves as Abraham's offspring and here is Paul telling them that even Abraham didn't work for his righteousness. Paul says in **verse 4 the one who works, his wage...is his due**. In other words, if a man could work his way to Heaven, God would owe him.

COUNTED AS RIGHTEOUS

In contrast, Paul says in **verse 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness**. The sinner, or as Paul says **the ungodly**, who realizes they can never earn their salvation and places their trust not in their own merit but in the work of Jesus, is **justified**, declared not guilty, by God.

Let's not move beyond this too quickly. Paul is laboring in chapters 1-3 and now 4-5, spending a third of the letter, laying the foundation that you and I could never do enough good in this world to warrant God's approval. We could never work off our sin debt. We could never attain to His righteous standard. And yet, despite this reality, in spite of our ongoing accrual of sin debt, God declares you not-guilty, propitiates his just wrath toward you, and all of this simply by faith.

You who were once unrighteous and unable to do anything about it, have been made righteous and there's nothing you can do to reverse it. Because it has nothing to do with your actions. It is based solely upon your faith.

Having said that, we're going to turn now to saving faith. From here to the end of chapter 4, Paul shows us the faith of Abraham, the faith by which he was counted righteous.

WHY IT DEPENDS ON FAITH

In **Romans 4:9-12**, Paul argues that this blessing is not only for Jews, but also for anyone who exercises the faith of Abraham. To evidence this, he says in **verses 11-12 ¹¹He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹²and to make him the**

father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

For Paul to be speaking of God's blessings through Abraham and appeal to Gentiles before Jews, and qualifying his statement about the Jews, saying **who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of faith**, seems intentionally provocative to me. Sometimes people need to be provoked, stirred up, even shocked out of their spiritual coma with strong rhetoric like this.

In **Romans 4:13-18** Paul expounds upon the blessing of righteousness as a promise of God, saying in **verse 16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring.**

Paul appeals to the original promise of God. It was not that Abraham would just be a blessing to the nation of Israel, but "*in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*" *Genesis 22:18* It was through his offspring, namely Jesus, that all the nations would be blessed. And specifically, through faith in Him, again, sharing the faith of Abraham. What kind of faith did Abraham have?

Paul tells us in **Romans 4:19-22 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."**

Paul points out that Abraham's faith was not **weakened** by the practical limitation, "impossibility" is more like it, of a 100-year-old man and 90-year-old woman conceiving a child together. Nor did he **waver in unbelief** when God told him to sacrifice the promised child, through whom the blessing to the nations would come. Why? Abraham was **fully convinced**. In other words, Abraham's faith was not weakened by seeming impossibilities and he was fully convinced that God is able to do what He promises.

FULLY CONVINCED

If we go back to Romans 3:28, **one is justified by faith apart from works of the law**, now that we know what we know about Abraham's faith, what becomes clear is that Paul isn't describing what has come to be called "easy-believism" or "cheap grace."

The faith Paul is describing, the faith of Abraham, the faith that gets counted to you as righteousness is more than simply claiming to believe. It is believing. It is believing to the point that you act. This is James' point, "*What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*" *James 2:14*

James warns us there is a type of so-called faith that doesn't save us. And Paul would echo that sentiment. Faith that counts us righteous is a shared faith with Abraham who put his entire life in the hands of God and trusted him, fully convinced. He was undeterred by his circumstances, and he stood firmly on God's promises.

Exactly what promises do Christians stand on? What is the substance of our faith? What do we believe? We believe what Paul says in **Romans 4:24-25** ²⁴...It [righteousness] **will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,** ²⁵**who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.**

There's the gospel in a nutshell. This is what we believe: that **God**, being the sovereign Creator of the Universe, holy and eternal, **raised from the dead Jesus**, also God, sent in the flesh. This obviously implies Jesus really died. Furthermore, this Jesus who died and was raised is **our Lord**. Implied here is that real faith leads to submission to Him as Lord.

Paul continues, **He was delivered up for our trespasses**, which implies outside His death we have to pay for our own sin, and as we'll see next week, *"the wages of sin is death."* *Romans 6:23*

Finally, Paul says, **he was raised for our justification**. We know that God accepted Jesus' atoning sacrifice as a propitiation for our sin because He brought Him back to life and seated Him at His right hand in Heaven. When we believe these things and we are fully convinced that God is able to keep His promises, He justifies us, declaring us not guilty for our sin, based upon our sincere faith in Him.

This means we have eternal life with Him in a real place called Heaven! But this impacts more than just our life hereafter. It changes our experience of life here now as Paul explains in chapter 5.

LIFE BEFORE HEAVEN

Romans 5:1-5 ¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Our justification by faith gives us more than life after death, it gives us real hope to persevere through the trials of life. I think this is what Peter had in mind when he spoke of our faith saying, *"so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."* *1 Peter 1:7*

Peter and Paul show us that our faith is proven through our suffering. Our faith is shown to be real not so much by how we celebrate the wins, but by how we endure the loses.

When you come to really, truly believe and when you're fully convinced that God is able to do what He promised to you, that makes your faith just about unshakeable. When you live on a daily basis knowing that God loves you, and His Holy Spirit is constantly reminding you of this, there is a peace that comes with that knowledge. There is a hope that comes through hardship.

When you sink your anchor into the rock of Jesus Christ, knowing that God put Him forward as a propitiation by His blood, and that the motive of this was His love for you, the winds can blow and the ground can quake, but you're going to remain upright! And how do we know God actually loves us? Paul answers that question in the next passage.

GOD DEMONSTRATED HIS LOVE

Romans 5:6-9 ⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

There is no question whether God loves us or not. He has already proven He does! The cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of love. There is nothing He can do to more convincingly show His love for you than to put His only Son on the cross for your sin and give you His righteousness in exchange.

In **Romans 5:10-18** Paul lays down some really important doctrine – reconciliation to God, federal headship of Adam, through whom death spread to all men, and the new federal headship of Jesus, through whom all have access to the grace of God. Concluding in **Romans 5:16-17** ¹⁶**For the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.**

¹⁷For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

The free gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ. Do you know that you are righteous? Has that truth settled on you yet? If you have received this free gift of grace and if you have come to have faith in Christ then what is most true about you is that you have been made righteous. Without this you could not pray to God and be heard. You could not approach God's throne of mercy. But you can because you have been made righteous. And not "a little bit" righteous, because that is a contradiction of terms. You're "all the way" righteous!

You may not act according to your identity, and hopefully that bothers you. Paul is going to address that very thing in the following section on progressive sanctification in Romans 6-8. But, I need you to hear me, your progressive sanctification is proof of your justification, and your justification is your righteousness. If you hate your sin, it is because God has given you the righteousness of Christ. That's evidence of a renewed mind and a Holy Spirit-indwelt heart.

But you may come to a point that you wonder if God's grace has run out on you. You've given into the sinful impulses of the flesh and you just can't see how God could forgive you for that...again. I pray that the final words of Paul in this section of his letter are a balm to your weary soul.

ABUNDANT GRACE

Romans 5:19-21 ¹⁹For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is God's disposition toward you in Christ. Abundant grace. You are righteous in identity even if you are not righteous in deed. And God's grace abounds to cover those unrighteous deeds.

As we've seen today, our salvation is entirely a work of God. We are not justified by our own efforts, our own goodness, or our ability to follow the law—we are justified by faith, just as Abraham was.

Saving faith is not a passive concession, but a deep, unwavering trust in the promises of God. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we are not only forgiven but reconciled to God, freed from God's wrath, and given new life. And because of that, you can stand firm, unshaken, and confident—not in yourself, but in the finished work of Jesus.

So, as you walk out these doors today, let this truth take root in your heart: You are fully loved, fully forgiven, and fully secure in Christ. Amen?

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