

Romans, Part 15 – But Now

8/28/22

After some time away from our study of Romans we make our way back to that glorious epistle. For 14 Sundays in the spring, we considered what Paul tells us about the lost condition of humanity. We observed how he labors to show that Gentiles are lost and need a Savior and Jews are lost and need a Savior. When we left off, the apostle had removed from us any hope of being rescued from our sin by keeping the law. That way – obeying our way into God’s favor is hopeless. Indeed, he reminds us that such a rescue was never the purpose of the law. Instead, it was given to show us our need, by showing us our guilt. Remember that when the law was given to Israel on Mt. Sinai, the very Scriptures that record these commandments of a holy God also contained instructions for the sacrifice of animals for Passover and atonement. God gave the moral law but then he gives the law of substitution which suggests that God always knew we would fail to keep his good law. You will see this as we read again starting at the 19th verse of Romans 3. Romans 3:**19-24** *Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; ²⁰because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. 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.*

So – finally we are here. This is what Paul has been leading up to. This, starting in verse 21, is now the good news portion of the letter. This is the wondrous part. And I am thrilled to be teaching it. A lifetime ago I was a young man who was a fan of Johnny Carson and the Tonight Show. At 11:35 p.m. the band would play, Ed McMahon would come on, speaking over the music. He would announce the guests for that night and then he would say, “And now...here’s Johnny!” As a basketball fan in the 90s I remember well the opening of games in Chicago Stadium when Michael Jordan was leading the Bulls to

championships. They had fabulous high-drama music, and the announcer would speak over the music and say this, “And now, the starting lineup for your Chicago Bulls.” Oh, the expectancy! The build-up. And here the apostle comes up with his own *and now*. *Now* can be a critical word. It announces that the time for something big has come. That is certainly the case here – bigger than Carson. Bigger than Jordan. We will see what is introduced in verse 21, but first notice that it is not *and now* but it is *but now*. This is one of those big *buts* of Scripture. They highlight amazing contrasts. My favorite may be in Ephesians 2 where Paul has said we were dead in trespasses and sins, that we were by nature children of wrath. Then in Ephesians 2:4 we get *But God*. *But God*. Oh yea – **4-5** *But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ*. How glorious is that! And in Romans 3 we have a *but* of similar glory. Not a *But God*. This one is a *but now*. But the force and impact is the same. So is the context because in Romans 3 Paul has shown us that we were not righteous, not good, not worthy, that we all are in big trouble due to our rejection of God. He strips us of any false hope to be found in religion and, just as we are despairing, he comes out with *but now*. Would you say those wonderful words with me? *But now*. Say it louder – *but now!* One more time – **BUT NOW!**

Okay, enough with the hype – let’s get to the substance here – and there is plenty of it. I said that what Paul introduces here is better than Carson or Jordan. What is it? It is the righteousness of God. Or a righteousness of God. And Paul is saying that this righteousness is now revealed — made manifest. Now where have we heard that before? Well, go back to Romans 1 where we read of something else being revealed – 1:**18**a *the wrath of God is revealed from heaven*. We had some interesting Sundays unpacking that. But that is the verse that sets up our text for today. First, the wrath of God was revealed and explained. Now, two chapters later the righteousness of God, which answers that wrath, is revealed, and explained. I hope you are ready to go there and deep dive into the righteousness of God which is revealed to us and offered to us.

But first, we must clear up something. Something about the law that relates to the little word *now*. Paul, in the same verse where he says *now*- implying something new – he also

says this new thing should not be a surprise. You see that phrase – *witnessed by the law and the prophets*. This is a theme in Romans. The second verse in chapter one offers the same thought – which is that the gospel of Jesus was promised and portrayed for us back in the Old Covenant era when Moses and David and Isaiah were writing their Scriptures. That phrase we read *the law and the prophets* has reference to the two divisions of Old Testament Scripture. The word *law* sometimes, as in verse 20 refers to the commandments. At other times, as in verse 21 it refers to the Scriptures. You may remember that wonderful story of how the resurrected Jesus joined two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, but he obscured his identity so that they did not recognize him. In that context, he listened to their distress and despair over the crucifixion and then he said Luke 24:25-27 “*O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!*”²⁶*Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?”*²⁷*Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.* Wow! What would that sermon be worth? All the Old Testament Scriptures pointed to Jesus. Even in Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve fell into sin, we find God saying to the devil Genesis 3:15 *I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.* This speaks of the coming of Christ who would be wounded by Satan while dealing the devil a death blow. Then in chapter 12 of Genesis the Lord tells Abraham that through his offspring all the nations of the world would be blessed. Paul, in Galatians tells us this was fulfilled in Jesus and the near sacrifice of Isaac by his father was a picture of how God would one day give his only Son for us on that identical mountain.

Then we get all the ceremonial laws of Israel that point to Christ as the lamb of God, as the atoning sacrifice. In the Psalms as well, we have many great words about Jesus. Psalm 16 prophesies his resurrection. Psalm 22 the crucifixion. Psalm 23 depicts the great shepherd. Psalm 24 describes the ascension. And what of the prophets? So many passages with the greatest in Isaiah 53 where we read this 3-6 (NLT) *He was despised and rejected — a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.*⁴*Yet it was our*

weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. ⁶All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

So, yes, it - this righteousness from God - was witnessed by the law and the prophets. But now, Paul says, we understand it more fully. Time for us to grow in our understanding by working through what the apostle teaches right here in Romans 3 about the now revealed righteousness of God. And there are three terms that can help us appreciate what this is all about. The first term is *alien*. Do you know what a UAP is? When I grew up we called them UFOs. UAP is an unidentified aerial phenomenon. These are flying objects seen by military pilots and others that have a demonstrated capacity to do things that nothing known to human science can do. We don't know what they are or from whence they come. Are they from another country on Earth? Seems highly doubtful. Are they crafts from another world? Hmm. Intriguing idea and about as plausible as anything else. We humans are both fascinated and terrified by the idea of invading aliens – advanced life-forms from other planets or galaxies. Some think UAPs, the unidentified aerial phenomena are indicators of UABs – unknown alien beings. The meaning of “alien” is that it comes to us from somewhere else. It is not native to us.

How does this relate to the gospel? Because the righteousness of God means a righteousness which comes to us from God, from a source outside of ourselves. It is therefore alien. Many people don't get this. They think Christians believe folks have to be intrinsically, qualitatively righteous to be right with God. But that is not the gospel. The gospel is about this alien righteousness that comes to us from heaven and qualifies us to sit at the Lord's table, to worship Him, to know Him. And we know the origins of this alien righteousness. It is that of Jesus. We did not keep the law. He did. We did not live in perfect love. He did. We would never lay down our lives to please the Father. He did. What do zebras have that no other animals have? Baby zebras. What does Jesus have that no other human has ever had? His own righteousness. But praise be to God, he gives

it to us! 2 Corinthians 5:21 *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* That is saying that God the Father made the sinless one, Jesus, to be sin for us, with the goal that we might become righteous. Stand in wonder at this! Christ had to borrow sin and death from us. He had none of his own. But then there is the other side of the exchange. He gives us his life and righteousness.

This is the grand exchange, and it takes us to another key word which is *imputation*. Say that with me – *imputation*. To impute means to ascribe, assign or to accredit. This is the language of bookkeeping. Some have credits, some have debits. In the spiritual universe you and I are bankrupt needy debtors. Jesus however – has a surplus, an abundance of moral credit. The great transaction at Calvary is that he gets our debt, we get his credit. Double imputation. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says – he became sin and we become righteous. Jesus bears an alien guilt and suffers for it. We bear an alien righteousness and live because of it. Remember what we read from Isaiah 53:4 (NLT) *he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. 6c the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.*

What is the result of all this? You and I are free of our burden of guilt. It is taken away. What's more, we are clothed with positive righteousness. Time now for a third word. It is *justification*. It is used several times in Romans 3. Probably good if we understand it. Some help comes from the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster assembly. Question 33 asks, *what is justification?* The answer, "*Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us and received by faith alone.*" I implore you to have your entire family memorize that line. It is so rich. First, you see that justification is an act. It occurs in a moment, not over time. Sanctification – the purifying of a believer's life and behavior is a work of God. Progressive. But not justification. This is a judicial declaration – similar to a marriage pronouncement or an adoption decree. It changes a legal reality. We are accepted or viewed now as righteous. And why? How can God do this? Because he imputes Christ's goodness and holiness and obedience to us. We aren't just "not guilty"

we are “righteous” through Christ. This is grace upon grace, glory upon glory. Of these realities we will sing forever and ever. *My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus blood and righteousness. And When He shall come with trumpet sound, Oh, may I then in Him be found; dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless stand before the throne. Because the sinless Savior died My sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me. Behold Him there the risen Lamb My perfect spotless righteousness.*

Surely, we want to save time to sing of these glories. But we have more to see. Verse 22 speaks of *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.* Now, faith and belief mean the same thing. So twice there we are reminded that this gift of righteousness is not for every human, but targets those who believe in Jesus. You see that? Faith in Jesus, not obedience to the law is where Paul points us. In Titus 2 Paul writes **5** *He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness.* Same thing in Romans 3. In fact, he says this justification is *apart from the law.* But, in a way we are saved through law-keeping. We are. Saved through law-keeping — just not ours. Jesus kept the law for us. Look at what he said in Matthew 5:**17** *Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.* Hmm. Not abolish but fulfill. And once that is done, we may become righteous, not through the law but through Jesus. You see when we say that we are saved or justified by faith. We mean that we are saved by Jesus. Faith simply connects us to him. It has no power of its own. It is not a work. It is not meritorious. Apart from Christ, faith is pointless and powerless. John Stott is excellent on this point. He writes: *To say “justification by faith alone” is another way of saying, “justification by Christ alone.” Faith is the eye that looks to him, the hand that receives his free gift, the mouth that drinks the living water.* Stott quotes Richard Hooker who said: *God justifies the believer not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of his worthiness who is believed.*

It behooves us then, in the time we have left, to ponder the nature of true, saving faith in Jesus. It is the focus of Paul in this section as it is found in verse 22, then again in 25, then again in 26. What is meant by this word? It apparently is not as obvious as it may seem. James describes a type of faith that does not save. It is phony. What a tragedy it

would be to arrive at judgment day with a faith that is not genuine, not the real deal. So, please understand that the faith that lays hold of Christ and his righteousness is a heart-level trust in Jesus – in his person, in his word, in his work. It is not just an intellectual assent to certain creedal or historical claims. It is heart-level trust that will, that must, manifest in your conduct and in your affections. If you believe in this Jesus who died for you, surely you love him. Surely. Lacking that affection, that devotion, any faith you profess is suspect at best. Does that make sense?

And so, this heart-level trust looks to Jesus as your sufficiency. When the question is asked of you, *why will God let you into heaven? What is your confidence on judgment day?* Your reaction is to point immediately to Jesus. Not to a single thing you have done. But to what He has done on your behalf. That is trusting Him and him alone. Okay?

One more important point and we are done. Look yet again at verse 22-23a *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³for all have sinned*. No distinction? What's he mean? In context here he clearly means that the same gospel is for Jews and for Gentiles. No distinction. For the religious and the non-religious, for the learned and the ignorant, for the rich and the poor. No distinction. Why? Because all have sinned. Remember back to our last sermon? Diversity, equity, inclusion? Jew and Gentile both, equally guilty, all included among the lost. ²³*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*. One of the first verses I ever learned. Seems quite clear and simple, but I have met many Christians who seem to think that Jewish people are under a different covenant. A brother here told me once that Jews didn't need to be born again. That was just for Gentiles. Some think God has two plans of redemption going on in the world, one for Gentiles and another for Jews. Paul labors to show us that is not the case. If we are right with God, acceptable to God it is only because of his gift of redemption through Jesus. It is the only way because all of us have what? Sinned. We were created to reflect God's glory and we failed. We fell short. We all have that in common. And the redeemed in glory will all have something else in common, won't we? We will be wearing the robes of Christ's righteousness. We will rejoice in the gift of faith, and we will sing of redeeming love forever and ever. When we've been there 10,000

years bright shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun. Why? Because of amazing grace that saves wretches like us.

If you have never looked to Jesus by faith before. Now is your moment. Turn to him in heart-level trust, confessing your total lack and his total adequacy. Then join us to sing his praise which we will do right after we give thanks in prayer.