

## **“Justified by Grace”**

**Romans 3:1-31**

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How many of you here this morning have run a half or full marathon or rode a long bike ride—let’s say 50+ miles? I’m not a runner, but I have done a lot of cycling. My guess is that for those who have run or cycled long distances two things happened over the course of your run or ride. First, you hit a point where you asked yourself, *“Remind me again why I’m doing this. I’m tired and ready to be done, and I still have a long way to go.”* Secondly, I’m guessing that for most who have run or cycled long distances, you felt a satisfying sense of accomplishment and achievement when you were finished. I’d liken running or cycling long distances to reading and studying Paul’s letter to the Romans. There comes a point when as you read and study you think, *“When am I going to be finished? It’s difficult to understand everything Paul is saying. Maybe I should find something easier to read—like one of the Gospels or Acts.”* At the same time coming to a greater understanding of God’s nature and his amazing love for us is deeply rewarding. There are portions of this letter where as we read we feel like we’re “hitting the wall,” but the truth and insight God has for us is worth it. My challenge for us is, *“Hang in there. Paul’s words in Romans aren’t always easy to understand, but they’re worth digging into”*

Last week’s Scripture was hard, because the subject matter was challenging and convicting and what Paul wrote runs counter to our culture’s beliefs about sexuality. And it was also difficult, because none of us enjoy having our faults pointed out to us, and Paul put his finger on sins we all wrestle with. Today’s passage is difficult for another reason. In chapter 3 Paul refers to the complicated history of God’s interaction with the Jewish people, before he shifts to the implications of God’s grace for everyone.

Before I dive into God’s history with the Jewish people, Daniel and Isaac Wenger are going to read verses 19-24 of Romans 3...

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Paul begins the section Daniel and Isaac just read with, “*Now we know...*” and he starts the last section of that passage with the words, “*But now...*” Those phrases make it clear that a shift has occurred. That shift, as we’ll talk about more in a minute, is that the gospel—the good news of Jesus—is now available to Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews.

After reading Romans chapter 1 verses 18-32, we looked briefly at chapter 2, where Paul criticizes his people, the Jews, for their quickness to judge the sins of the Gentiles, while they themselves do the same things. The Jews status as God’s chosen people had gone to their heads, so that they were quick to judge others for their sinfulness, while they themselves had drifted far from God and his holiness. Paul is trying to help the Jews understand that while God set them apart as his chosen people and his desire was that they would live in such a way that the other nations would be attracted to God, it’s not the Jewish Law or keeping God’s commands, or their status as God’s people that makes them right before God. It’s only by placing their faith in God and receiving his grace through Jesus that they are made right and accepted by God. The ground is level at the foot of the cross for all people. That brings us to chapter 3 of Romans, where the Apostle Paul continues to speak to the Jews. I’ll begin by reading verses 1-8.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right when you speak  
and prevail when you judge.”

But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just! Romans 1:1-8

In these verses Paul addresses two questions that would have been on the minds of the Jews based on Paul’s assertion that it’s only by faith placed in Jesus that God’s grace is extended and that people are justified by Him. The first question is, “*If it’s grace through faith that makes us righteous in God’s sight, and not the keeping of the law, then is there any advantage in being a*

*Jew?*” In response, Paul explains that the Jewish people were privileged and uniquely blessed to receive the Old Testament Law and to be in relationship with God as his chosen people. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> question was, *“If God’s grace is poured out on us when we sin, should we sin more so that more of God’s grace is released?”* Paul dismisses that reasoning quickly without giving much of a response, because it’s evident elsewhere in Scripture (including in Romans 1) that sin has consequences. It’s true that where sin is great, God’s grace is available in greater measure, but we don’t sin and walk away unscathed. Sin has consequences that impact us negatively even when we’ve been forgiven by God.

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

“Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. Romans 3:9-20

Paul continues to emphasize in these verses Jews and Gentiles are alike; all under the power of sin. That statement alone would have been enough to shock Jews, because from the time they were small children the message they received was that they were special—God’s chosen people, they lived their lives believing that as Jews they were better than Gentiles—they were God’s favorites. Paul quotes from 5 different Psalms and from Isaiah chapter 59 to

highlight the prevalence of sin among the Jews. He wants them to understand that just as in Romans 1 he highlighted the brokenness in our world among Gentiles, the propensity to sin and turn away from God has always been a human challenge—one that the Jews also failed miserably at.

Paul then says, *“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.”* The Old Testament law was the pride and joy of the Jews. It symbolized their status as God’s favored people, because no other people had received the law as God had given it to Moses to pass on to the people of Israel. The purpose of the law Paul said wasn’t to save people, it was to make them aware of what sin was. When we read the words of the priests and the prophets in the Old Testament, we see them calling the Jewish people to follow God by adhering to the law, but they always failed. They were incapable of keeping the law. Paul reminds his Jewish readers again that no one is made righteous by the law, because it was impossible for anyone to keep the law.

Paul’s line of reasoning here supports the idea that throughout the Old Testament God’s purpose was to help his people understand that they could never be righteous based on their own works. They had the law, and priests and prophets, and the sacrificial system, and kings that were anointed by God, but they repeatedly failed. They couldn’t keep the law, and they couldn’t follow God in their own strength. Look again at some of the statements Paul quotes from the Psalms...

- The people turned away from God and have become worthless.
- Not one of them is good.
- Their throats are open graves. Their tongues are deceitful. Their lips are poisonous.
- Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.
- They are quick to shed blood, and the way of peace is foreign to them.
- There is no fear of God in them.

The Jews had the law, but it wasn’t keeping them from sinning. It wasn’t making them righteous before God. What the law did accomplish was help to make the people aware of their need of a solution only God could provide. The law and the Jews’ inability to keep it in their own strength highlighted their need of a Savior, a Messiah whom God would send.

And that brings us to the climax of this chapter, where Paul says a shift has taken place. I’ll begin reading at verse 21...

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,

through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Romans 3:21 & 26

The history of the Old Testament and God’s relationship with the Jews is important background for us to have. It helps us understand who God is and how He interacted with his people, but it’s what Paul writes in verses 21-27 that applies directly to our lives today.

The law and the prophets couldn’t save anyone, but what they did do was point people toward the coming of the Messiah—toward the righteousness that is now available through Jesus Christ to everyone who believes. Now that Jesus has come the wall between the Jews (God’s people) and the rest of humankind has been torn down. That brings us to Romans 3:23–24, words that are familiar to many of us. I’d like you to read these verses aloud with me.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:23 & 24

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. We’ve all sinned, and because of our sin, we fall short of God’s glory. But in spite of our sin, we can be justified (declared not guilty and acceptable to God) by God’s grace that comes to us through Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus redeemed us. The word *redeemed* is a term often connected to slavery. It means to buy and return one’s freedom. Through his death on the cross, Jesus paid the price for our sin, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin and to Satan, but that instead we might be free to follow God and live in victory. And Paul continues in verses 27-31...

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. Romans 3:27-31

No one has the right to boast in their own goodness or in their ability to faithfully keep the law—not Jews or Gentiles—because it is only by faith we place in God and the grace He extends to us in Jesus that any of us is made right, accepted and able to be in relationship with God. God is the God of Jews and Gentiles and his grace and forgiveness is available to all of us who turn to Him. No one is excluded.

This chapter is filled with heavy, theological terms: righteousness and unrighteousness,

condemnation, circumcision, justification, redemption, and atonement, but in the midst of those weighty concepts I don't want us to lose the heart of this passage of Scripture.

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Wherever you've been; whatever you've done; however you were raised; whatever you believed; wherever you find yourself today; and, whatever your as yet unknown future might hold, God's grace and mercy and forgiveness and wholeness are available to you as you place your faith in Jesus Christ, accepting the work He did for you on the cross.

for **all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God, **and all are justified** freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:23 & 24