

Romans

#8: The Only Way to a Righteous God

Romans 3:21-26

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- October 5, 2025

Well, let's get started with our learning time together. I'll just tell you—this is how it ends. You're going to say, "Wow." And then you're going to say, "Thank you." So, I'm just going to get ahead of that and say, "You're welcome."

We're looking at Romans 3:21-26. Scholars say that this is the single most important sentence in the Bible. It's four or five sentences for us. It's one sentence for Paul. Martin Luther said this is "the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible."

Scholar Leon Morris said it "is possibly the most important single paragraph ever written" by human hands.

John Hannah, who used to teach church history at Dallas Theological Seminary, said that if bad guys were going to invade your house and try to take your Bible, you tear out this one paragraph, memorize it, and you can write the rest of the Bible around it. It's that good of a passage. It's everything.

Here's a quick review before we get going on Romans 3:21-26. We've been in over two chapters that are coming to the conclusion that we are guilty—all of us. There is none righteous, not even one. The outline was: a condemnation of the Gentiles, a condemnation of the moral person, and a condemnation of the Jews, the people who received the law of God. And it led to the doctrine of total depravity. That is, the universal nature of sin encompasses everyone, everywhere, at all times; and then, the depth of it is that we are rotten to the core, completely. Our essence has been warped.

Psalm 89:14

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne.

And because of that sin, we are violating the very righteousness of God, the glory of His creation. It says in Psalm 89 that “Righteousness and justice”—remember those two words—“are the foundation of Your throne.”

So, for the most part, chapters 1 through 3 are not trying to save you; they’re trying to convince you that you’re dead. They’re not trying to help you get found; they’re trying to convince you and prove to you that are lost.

But now there’s a radical shift in the topic and the mood of Paul’s lesson here in his outline, because he’s going to switch from what we have ruined to what God has fixed. And only God could fix this. And only God could fix this only one way. It’s all in this one sentence. And the sentence begins with “But now ...”

Martin Lloyd-Jones, a famous British preacher and an expert on Romans, said there are no two better words in the Bible than “But now ...” And that’s why we sang “Amazing Grace”—“I once was lost, but now I’m found. I once was blind, but now I see.” The universe pivots on this sentence.

Righteousness and Justification

We’re going to look at this, and we’re trying to teach how to study your Bibles more effectively. And one of the ways we do that is to underline or emphasize words or phrases or concepts that are repeated throughout the passage, because maybe that’s just, in fact, what the author’s big idea is. We’re going to do that here. And we’re going to start with “righteousness” and “justification.” It’s the same Greek word—it’s just in a different form. But I’ll show you this as we go.

Romans 3:21-26

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, ²⁵ whom God put forward (publicly displayed) 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. ²⁶ It 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.**

Here's the passage. Here's the one sentence that Paul writes. We're going to emphasize this. **"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 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, whom God put forward (publicly displayed)"**—that's a great translation—"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. It was to show His righteousness"—there it is again—"at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier ..."

Five times "righteousness" is used. Four times "justify" is used. And it's because it's quite probably the most important word in the entire Bible. Twenty-eight times in the Book of Romans alone Paul is going to use the word "righteous." Fifteen times he'll use "justify." It's the same Greek word. The noun "righteousness" and the verb "justified" is the same Greek word. It's just being used in different ways.

And it's the most important word because it's about the nature of God, first of all. And the word itself means (it's a review)—it's defined in the Bible to be a plumbline. It means "perfect perfection." It means that God, one, in His nature, in His very essence, is righteous and holy. **"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord."** **"Righteousness and justice are His foundation."** Remember that Psalm? It's the way He is.

There's a relational aspect of the word "righteousness" and "justification." The relational part is this: it's not that God won't socialize and enjoy fellowship with things that aren't perfect. He can't. The relational part of it is that He cannot commune with anything except with those who are perfect—those who are perfectly perfect, who are righteous. He must live in a germ-free environment. And we don't have germs—we are the germs.

The third aspect of righteousness and justification is as it applies to the actions, the choices, that the righteous God makes. He can't do anything that's not righteous. He's constrained by the boundaries of His justice. That's key to all His actions.

And the reason that I'm bringing that up is because I want us to now look at another repeated part of this. And that is the idea of something being exposed, something being seen by us. You can see that the righteousness of God has been made manifest. It's being shown **"apart from the law, although the law and the prophets did bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 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, whom God put forward and publicly displayed 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. It 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."**

It's not just about His righteousness and justice; it's about showing it. Four times it's saying that He's trying to show this off. Why? That's the theme here. Why is that the theme? Because as Kevin said the last two weeks when he was talking about sinfulness, he said that it's a trial. It is a trial. And there are two people on trial here. There's us (regular trials do this) and there's the judge. The judge is on trial to see if He's just.

It wouldn't be hard to imagine if some cartel leader or murderer or drug trader was brought in and tried for his capital offenses, and the jury comes back and says, "Guilty on all

accounts.” And then it goes back to the judge for sentencing, and he says, “You know ... you can go. Go ahead and leave.” We’re all enraged because the judge is unjust. We say that the judge has been bought. The judge is probably part of the mob. He is not righteous.

Proverbs 17:15

Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both.

So, while we’re on trial for sure—here’s God’s view of the judge—“**Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—God detests them both.**” That’s not a righteous judge.

And so, the passage here is trying to show us that we’re picking up where we left off in the trial, and the jury has come back on all of us and said that we’re totally depraved. Now it’s switching to looking at the judge. Is the judge righteous? And so, four times in the sentence he says that’s what is on display for all of creation to see.

Here’s the issue. We ask, and the problem that we have, is this: How can a loving God send someone to hell? And we think that’s the question that the Bible is trying to answer for us: How can a loving God allow us to go to hell? And you look at the last two and a half chapters, and you realize that we choose to. We don’t want to be and cannot stand to be in the presence of the holiness of God.

That’s not the question that the Bible is answering. That’s not the problem that needs to be solved. The Bible asks the question: How can a loving and righteous God allow any of us to go to heaven? That’s the problem. We earn our way to hell. How can God righteously allow people who aren’t righteous to get to heaven? How good do you have to be to go to heaven? You have to be as good as God.

And this is the cosmic problem that this passage is answering for us: that the righteousness that is required for us—God can’t compromise on His own perfection on that. So, the gospel, our salvation, the word “justification” that’s emphasized here, are challenging the very righteousness of God. And that’s the focus of this single sentence that Paul is writing here.

Romans 3:21-23

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 ...

So now we're going to look at it closer and see how he's going to answer this question. So, let's just take the verses one or two at a time. **"But now the righteousness of God"**—there's that phrase—**"the righteousness of God has been revealed, manifested, apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets did bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."**

Romans 3:24

...and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...

There's the problem. Now he's going to go on and say, *Okay, how is that solved by God?* Here's how. Multiple times he's going to give this answer. **"... and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."**

The first word we're going to emphasize—you need to define this—the right side of your notebooks is going to get filled up today—is "justified." You need to know what that word means. It is the verb form of "righteousness." It means to be declared righteous. And what's especially important here is that every book you're going to read on this word being used in Greek says that it is in the context of a courtroom. It is judicial in nature. It is forensic. And it means that a judge, a person with great wisdom and the executive power, is declaring at a special time that you are righteous. It's a declaration of righteousness.

And it's the way the verb tense is being used here: it's at a place and a time that carries forward. In other words, it happens all at once. Justification is the doctrine of it happening all at once. You don't become righteous over time. Think of the moment the gavel hits. That's when

you're righteous. And it's not after community service. It's not part righteous, part unrighteous. It's all at once.

And the way we can think of it more graphically is that it's kind of two layers. I love the way Tim Keller puts it, because it makes it more relational. This declaration of justification, this "justified," is, one, forgiveness. But forgiveness says, *I release you. You can leave. And no hard feelings.* But the second part is that justification, this declaration of righteousness, says, *Not only are you absolved from your debt, but you received great merit.* And in the context of relationship, *I don't want you to leave. I want you to stay. And I want us to enjoy each other.*

So, it's not simply forgiveness. It's this *Let's do all of this together.*

Redemption

So, how does this justification happen? How is that happening? Well, it's by His grace. It's a gift through the next word we're going to look at—"redemption." That's how the justification takes place. And this word means to pay for something, to buy something back, usually of great value. Sure, you can redeem something at a pawn shop. Maybe you lent them your engagement ring, and later you'll redeem it and pay them back.

But more significantly, it's used to liberate someone from darkness. It's the word used to liberate someone from slavery. If a family member were to be captured and caught in slavery, your redemption of them would be to pay that person, and you win them back.

Another way the word is used and illustrated is as a ransom payment. It's very similar, right? Someone is being held, and you pay that ransom. That's what it means to redeem something. And in this case, Jesus is paying the ransom to the holiness of God, to the righteousness of God.

Propitiation

Romans 3:24b-25

...the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation for His blood, to be received by faith.

And so, how does this redemption take place? We continue with the verse. It says, “... **the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward (publicly displayed) as a propitiation ...**”—there’s our word—“**as a propitiation for His blood, to be received by faith.**”

Propitiation: when do we ever use that word? It means an atoning sacrifice. And the Bible translators only use a very few times. I think it’s used one other time in the New Testament, in the Book of Hebrews. It is so seldom used. And a lot of translations will insert “atoning sacrifice.” But these translators are letting you know, *No, no, we’re going to use that word, and you’re going to have to go look it up.*

There is power in that word. It means to satisfy justice. It means to be the object of wrath. It is the lightning rod in a violent storm.

And many of the believers in the Roman church were Jewish. And they went right to the Day of Atonement. Because that’s the word in Hebrew—propitiation and atonement. And the Day of Atonement was just last week, you might know. It’s the most holy of all the days of the year. I can’t go into all the details. But it’s when the great high priest would go into the Holy of Holies. He would slaughter a lamb, which would be representing the wrath of God on this particular ram. And he would go into the Holy of Holies. And not only the Holy of Holies—he would go to the Ark of the Covenant. You’ve seen the pictures and the movies, right? Inside of the Ark of the Covenant were three things that God gives us that we violate. Inside the Ark is manna. God provides for our well-being, and we are discontent, and we rebel against God because of the manna. There’s the rod of Aaron. That’s how God protects us, by giving us

authorities. And the people rebelled against Aaron. And then the Ten Commandments are inside the Ark of the Covenant. And those are the laws that liberate us, and we violate them.

So, inside this Holy of Holies, inside this Ark of the Covenant, is the goodness of God and our contempt towards Him—our sin. And so, there's a lid over it. And that lid is gold, and it's called the Mercy Seat. You might know it as that. It's also called the Seat of Atonement. It's also called the Place of Propitiation.

And that high priest, on the Day of Atonement, will come in and cover that and sprinkle that with blood, to hide those sins from the eyes of God. And the wrath of God would be poured out on that ram. And that would be the Day of Atonement.

And so, the point of that celebration every year was the remission of sins—the sins were taken away. But also, it was about the wrath of God being dealt with—at least for a year.

By His Blood

And if you look at the passage here, what is the currency of the propitiation? What is the cost of appeasing this wrath? His blood. Somebody had to pay, and it wasn't going to be a lamb.

Peter says, your redemption—there's that word—**“You are redeemed not with perishable things like silver and gold ... but through the imperishable blood of Jesus the Christ.”**

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world”—the lamb that was without spot or wrinkle. By His blood ...

The crucifixion was not just to show the love of God; it was to show the holiness of God and the wrath of God. Jesus didn't just die for you; He died instead of you. You were supposed to do that.

Publicly Displayed

It just keeps getting better. The next thing I want to emphasize here is that He put forward—which is our theme, remember? We're showing that it was obvious. “He publicly displayed”—I love that translation so much more—“publicly displayed.” It wasn't hidden. It wasn't in a corner. It was in Israel. From God's map, that's the center of the world, in Jerusalem,

which is the center of Israel, on that hill—on that special hill. It was during Passover, the most populated time of the year for Israel. And the public execution was literally designed to be visible to everyone. It took six hours just for the crucifixion, from 9:00 am to 3:00 pm. Everyone saw it. And on the cross of Jesus the Christ is His name and His crime: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” And it’s written in three languages—Greek, Hebrew, and Latin—because so many different people from all over the world just happened to be there. And they all needed to see this public display. Did He die? Oh, they made sure He died. Instead of breaking His legs, they speared His heart, and out came both blood and water. No doubt about it.

Why? Why the public display of this propitiation of death? Because the cosmic problem is: How is God going to let anything but righteousness into His presence? This is so that all of creation, the visible and the invisible, would acknowledge that this has taken place. Because the angelic world wonders, *Is God good? Is He righteous? Can He do this?* And the demons are waiting to pounce. They want to accuse the judge of being unjust, of not holding onto righteousness.

And so, this passage is God saying, *Are you not convinced that I’ve made this public display of my wrath, of my vengeance on evil?*

The way Jesus died, and the method and the place should be convincing.

Romans 3:25

This was to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins.

Why the dramatic display? Why going through all this? The passage continues. Because it **“was to show God’s righteousness.”** How did He do that? It was to show God’s righteousness **“because of His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins”**—former sins from Adam to Jesus. There are bills to pay. And the blood of bulls and goats cannot satisfy the cost of sin.

And so, again, angels and demons are watching this credit card rolling up, and each of those rituals on the Day of Atonement are only paying off the credit card interest, not the principal. And the principal grows.

And so, the whole world, all of creation, is wondering, *Are You going to wink? Are You going to wink at this debt?* And the first reason God's righteousness is on public display is because in His divine forbearance He had passed over previous unforgiven sins. *So, is this lump sum payment going to be enough for these Old Testament people?* Yeah, it will.

Romans 3:26

It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

And then the second reason—look what it says—“to show God's righteousness.” He's going to say it again in the next sentence. **“It was to show God's righteousness for the present time, so that He might be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”**

He's showing us that He's righteous, that He's the one who declares what is righteous. There's no compromise. Why so public? Why so horrible? Because the righteousness of God was in no way brought up for contempt. It's not only that Jesus forgives us, or that God forgives us through Jesus; it is the means by which we obtain justification, the declaration of righteousness. The means by which God does this is righteous. That's the gospel. Because the problem is not how God could allow people to go to hell. It's how God allows anyone to go to heaven? And it has to be done in a righteous way.

The good news, the great news of the gospel, is this public display of propitiation, this wrath of God costing the blood of Jesus. Did you know forty percent of the gospels are about the death and the resurrection of Jesus? Forty percent—what does that say? It's all leading to that. If we needed a teacher, He could have sent us another teacher. If we needed another role model, He could have sent us another role model. We needed propitiation for the cost of our sin. We had to become perfectly perfect, and this is the only way it could work.

And as the passage says, it's not earned. It's revealed. It's shown to us. It's made manifest. He's made it clear.

It is a message of how a righteous God makes people righteous righteously. The theme of the gospel is the righteousness of God.

---Douglas Moo

Again, that quote from Douglas Moo, the scholar of Romans: “It is a message of how a righteous God makes people righteous righteously. The theme of the gospel is the righteousness of God.”

Jesus didn’t just die for the will of the Father. He died for the nature of the Father. Think about that. Jesus didn’t just die because of the will of His Father. He died for the nature of the Father—to keep His nature righteous.

The cross allowed God to save us and still be God.

Here’s a great quote: “The cross allowed God to save us and still be God.”

One sentence—try to say that in one breath. Look at all that it says.

So, how do we apply this? Well, we’ve talked exclusively at this point of what God has done. Let’s look at the passage and again and see what we do. How do we get this justification? Let’s go through it again and see if there’s a repetition of phrases that helps us do that, maybe five times?

Faith in Jesus and His Gift of Grace

Romans 3:21-26

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, ²⁵ whom God put forward (publicly displayed) 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. ²⁶ It 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**.

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets did bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified by His grace as a gift”—it is a gift. How is it a gift? “...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward (publicly displayed) as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. And that was to show God's righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He has passed over former sins. It 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.”

One, two, three, four, five times? Is that clear? Is he mentioning any kind of works on our behalf? No, he doesn't. It's about faith and faith alone. And faith has to have faith, belief, trust. It means putting all your weight in. It means that you won't put a little bit of your good works or church attendance into it, whatever it might be, the way you keep score. It's none of that. It's entirely faith.

What's the object of the faith? Every act of faith has to have an object. What is the object of the faith? The object of the faith is this verse. It's this paragraph. The object of the faith is that

God's righteousness was revealed through the redemption that we received as a gift from Jesus Christ. How? Because He became the propitiation, the atonement, that was publicly displayed. So, He got wounded? No! By His blood, His death, and His resurrection proved it to be true. The object of faith is that this sentence is true: that Jesus came to die for our sins, not just for us, because we were supposed to die for it ourselves.

And by the way, when you make this choice the rest of the Book of Romans is really just explaining this paragraph. He's going to explain it, and then he's going to prove it, and then he's going to apply it. But this is the object of your faith: that this cosmic problem is solved by God and by God alone. And you put all your faith in that fact.

Have you ever done that? Faith alone in a gift alone—right? Motivated by His mercy. If you've never done that, you're not a Christian, but a church attender. Because this is the definition of Christianity. And if you haven't done that, you can do that today. And this is the quite the day to do it. It's the single best sentence ever written by human hands. That's what you're putting your faith in—a message from God. He fixed what you broke and couldn't fix.

This was always the plan, because it was the only plan. You see, God Almighty cannot justify us without that cross on that hill. Do you see that now? God Almighty, YHWH, because of His righteousness, cannot give us righteousness without that cross on that hill.

I think it's fair to say that God in His sovereignty invented Easter eggs in a story where He gives you clues. Because that hill is the hill that David bought when the wrath of God was pouring down on Israel because of David's sin. He bought that hill so that he could offer a sacrifice and atone for those sins, and the wrath of God would be forwarded.

And on that hill Solomon built the first temple where the Day of Atonement year after year would be practiced. And then that temple was ultimately destroyed, and Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple on that same very hill. And then when the Romans came through, Herod, as a gift, oddly enough, rebuilt the temple for the Jews in the splendor of its Solomon days—on that same hill. And it was in the temple that Herod built that Jesus taught. That's the temple that He enjoyed, and it was on that hill.

And a thousand years before Jesus was dedicated at that temple, God came to Abraham in Genesis 22 and said, "Abraham."

"Yes, Lord?"

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, the one that you love. And take him to that hill and give him to me. Offer him as a sacrifice.”

And Abraham took Isaac. It was a three-day journey. When they get to the bottom of the hill Isaac says, “Father, we have wood and we have fire, but what of the sacrifice?”

And Abraham said, “Son, the Lord will provide.”

And they built the altar on top of that hill. And he bound Isaac. And just before he was to take Isaac’s life, an angel said, “Abraham, Abraham, you don’t need to do that. You know you love me, and I know you love me.”

So, he takes Isaac down and he looks in a bush, and there’s a ram. And God said, “There it is.” And God provided. The Lord will provide.

When Isaac said, “Where’s the offering?” Abraham said, “The Lord will provide.” “The Lord will provide” is a phrase for Jehovah-Jireh. He’s said that Jehovah-Jireh will provide it.

And then Abraham named that hill Jehovah-Jireh. Because he said, “On this hill the Lord will provide.”

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son”—His only Son, the one that He loved, Jesus—because it was the only way.

We have the cross and we have the nails. But where’s the lamb? And the Father did not hold back this time—His only son, the one that He loved. Because it was the only way. It was the only way that could work. And we still name that hill “God provides.”

That’s the gospel, friends. That’s the good news, and it’s great news. And that’s why Paul says in the first chapter, **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation.”** How’s that? Because verse 17 says **“...the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”**

You’re welcome.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful that You would not just die for us, but for the Father and His righteousness, for the triune God whose holiness cannot be compromised. You died for us and for Your own nature.

Lord, I’d ask that You would help us appreciate the fullness of our salvation; how good the good news is, how great the great news is, and how it’s news. We could never invent this. We could never make this storyline up. And You provide this for us.

I'd ask that we would live lives of men and women who are not ashamed of the gospel because of this power. Because it reveals who You are and what You're like. And the angels celebrate, and the demons cower, because You are righteous and You maintained Your righteousness in the way that You made us righteous. You justified us. God, we are grateful.

Holy Spirit, I'd ask that You would fill us in ways that we would live supernatural lives to reflect that You can house Yourself in our souls, because now it's been cleaned and made perfectly perfect; that Your Spirit would run wild within us; that it would give us courage and peace and patience and kindness, and that the fruits of Your Spirit would be evident. We are grateful, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the way You've changed us so that we might glorify You. We pray this in Jesus' name. And everybody said, Amen.