

Being Right with God (1)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 February 2008

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well friends, I'm with you, God willing, for three Wednesday lunchtimes, today and the next two weeks, and I'd like to speak over these three Wednesdays on the short paragraph, Romans chapter 3, verses 21 to 26, and you might like to turn that up in your Bibles. You'll find it on page 940 in our big hardback Bibles.

Now this paragraph, Romans 3, verses 21 to 26, is one of the great paragraphs of the Epistle to the Romans.

In fact, the Australian theologian Leon Morris has described it as the most important paragraph ever written. I don't know whether that's a justifiable comment, but it's certainly an intriguing one.

This paragraph takes us right to the heart of the Gospel, and it describes the way in which God has made it possible for sinful men and women to be forever in the right with him, rather than being forever condemned by him as we deserve.

So in a moment, I'll read this paragraph out loud, but I want to pick up Paul's train of thought from verse 9 onwards, so that we can see how this little paragraph fits into his developing argument in Romans.

[1 : 21] Now friends, brace yourselves for verses 9 to 20, because if we have anything like a tender conscience inside us, these verses will do a demolition job on it.

So are you ready? And it's your tender conscience at the ready. So here we go, verse 9. What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all.

For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. He's talking about the whole human race here, Jews and Gentiles. 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. Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

[2 : 20] Their feet are swift to shed blood. In their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

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.

Now, that 20th verse is critically important, because it shows us that however hard a human being works and works at trying to keep the law of God, he or she cannot do it.

You are more capable of running from Glasgow to Edinburgh in 10 minutes than of keeping the law of God. That's what verse 20 amounts to.

[3 : 26] Now, verse 21. 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 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.

When I was 21 years old, I was invited to a 21st birthday party by a friend of mine, and this party was held in a small concert hall.

It was a room about the same size as this room, with an oval area in the centre for the musicians to perform, and the audience would sit in banked-up seats up to the side, perhaps a little bit broader than this room, but quite high banked-up seats.

[4 : 54] And when this party was in full swing, I was down there amongst all the guests on the ground floor, and I happened to notice, sitting quite high up on one of these benches at the side, a man who was smartly dressed in a dinner jacket, black jacket and white shirt and bow tie, and this man was all on his own, and he was very old.

His hair, which was rather long, and his bristling walrus moustache, were snow white. There was nobody with him, and he beckoned to me when he saw that I'd caught his eye.

So I climbed up the rows of benches, and I sat down beside him, and we got talking, and he opened the conversation. He said to me, I'm 90. How old are you?

So I said, Well, sir, I'm 21. Which was indeed the truth. And anyway, we got talking, and I discovered that he was the grandfather of the girl who was celebrating her 21st birthday.

And he told me that he'd been widowed for a number of years. He had seven children, the oldest of whom I think was 65 at the time. And he lived all on his own now, deep in rural Buckinghamshire, as deep as you could go.

[6 : 09] And he was very lonely. He asked me if I drove a car. I said, Yes, I do. He said, You wouldn't come and visit me occasionally, would you? I said, Yes, all right, I will. So over the next two or three years, up to the time of his death, I used to go and see this old man, and we'd have lunch together.

I just went on three or four occasions, but we would have lunch together, and I'd spend two or three hours in the afternoon talking to him. And as I got to know him, I discovered that he was deeply troubled.

He told me that he'd been a junior minister in Mr. Asquith's government during the First World War. And when he was a junior minister, aged I think about 31, so he was talking about a period 60 years previously, when he was a junior minister, he was involved in some kind of a scandal.

I never discovered what it was, but he'd had to go to prison, and he served a prison sentence for 12 months. And once he'd come out of prison, of course, there was no return for him into public life.

Now, all this had happened, as I say, something like 60 years previously, and yet here he was, at the age of 90 plus, still deeply troubled. And the way that he expressed to me the sense of pain in his heart was in the form of a question.

[7 : 22] He said to me, Edward, is it possible that I might be forgiven? Now, I'm aware that that is the question that faces all of us.

Most of us, I guess, have not been involved in some kind of public scandal. Perhaps only a very few of us may have served a prison sentence. But we are all aware that we're sinful people who have often broken God's moral law.

And therefore, we know we have often aroused God's hostility against us. Is it possible, therefore, for sinful men and women like us to be forgiven, to be accepted by God, to be welcomed by this holy God whose laws we have often willfully broken?

Now, turning to Romans 3 and verse 21, you'll see that verse 21 begins with the words but now. Now, that is a very significant moment.

It's one of the great but nows of the Bible in which what follows is in stark contrast to everything that comes before. So, if we're going to feel the force of verses 21 to 26, we need first to grasp something of what Paul the Apostle is saying prior to chapter 3, verse 21.

[8 : 41] So, let me spend a few minutes now trying to summarize the thrust of the first two and a half chapters of Romans. Could we turn back over the page to chapter 1? Now, after Paul's opening remarks, you'll see he tells the Roman Christians in chapter 1, verse 15 that he's eager to preach the gospel in Rome.

And what does this gospel do? Well, he tells them in the very next verse, verse 16. I'm 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.

But in this gospel, something is revealed. And this is why it is the power of salvation to both the Jew and the Greek. What is revealed?

Well, have a look at verse 17. In our English standard version that we have here, the translation is given for in it, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

But in the New International Version, verse 17 reads, for in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. Now, I think that second translation, a righteousness from God, is actually a better translation.

[10 : 00] The same thing applies to chapter 3, verse 21. And I say that partly because in his Greek, the Apostle Paul does not use the definite article. He doesn't say the righteousness of God.

He simply says a righteousness. But also because his whole purpose in these early chapters of Romans is to explain to his readers how a righteous status, a position of being in the right with God, is available to sinful men and women.

You see, if Paul had said there the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, he would have been describing an attribute of God, God's righteousness in himself, his holiness, his moral perfection, his absolute justice.

But that's not what Paul is wanting to emphasize here. He's speaking here not of an attribute of God's person, but of a gift that comes from God to believing men and women, a status, given to us by God, whereby we are reckoned by him to be in the right when we stand before the judgment seat.

Now this is the thrilling and astonishing thing about the gospel, that a status of righteousness in the sight of God is available to undeserving sinners. Now Paul is determined that the Romans should understand deeply what this gospel is.

[11 : 26] And you'll see that that key phrase, a righteousness from God in chapter 1, verse 17, is repeated in chapter 3, verse 21. This is Paul's theme.

But Paul is not prepared to jump straight from chapter 1, verse 17 to chapter 3, verse 21. There is something that has to be faced and explained and accepted in the meantime.

And if we don't face it and understand it, we'll never grasp the gospel, except in a rather superficial way. So Paul takes us straight into it at chapter 1, verse 18.

For he says there, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. And between verse 18 and the end of chapter 1, Paul details, he doesn't just say that all humans are sinners, he's much more detailed.

He goes into the various forms of human sin, especially the core forms of human sin, the denial and suppression of the truth about God, the manufacture and worship of idols, sexual unchastity, and we should note in the context of much modern discussion that that includes homosexual practice in verses 26 and 7, both male and female.

[12 : 45] And then we have a detailed list of sins in verses 29 to 31. Against all these things, verse 18 says, the wrath of God is being revealed.

Now friends, let's be thankful, very thankful, that we know that God is angry with these things. Let's be very thankful that we can know that God is a God of wrath as well as a God of love.

And what I mean is this, God's wrath is not capricious and unpredictable anger like the anger that you and I sometimes give way to. When we get angry, I speak for myself certainly, our anger is volatile and selfish, usually trivial and always sinful and wrong.

But God's anger is always right. His anger is his settled, permanent hostility to everything that is wrong. And we should be glad that he's like that and glad to know that he's like that.

Because if he were, for instance, angry with murder and adultery one day, but not angry with murder and adultery on the next day, we wouldn't know where we were up to with him.

[13 : 56] We'd be morally at sea. The universe would be morally unstable. But we know exactly what he thinks about murder and adultery and idolatry and truth suppression and deceit.

He's against them. He's against them. Always. But while we can be thankful for this consistent anger against sin, at the same time, we are condemned by it.

Because we are by nature idolaters and truth suppressors and adulterers and deceivers. Then in Romans chapter 2, Paul particularly addresses his Jewish readers because he knows that for centuries, they have regarded themselves as being morally superior to the Gentiles.

But Paul tells them in chapter 2 that although they have the great blessing of the Old Testament, which the Gentiles have not had, they're not law keepers, as they fondly think.

They are law breakers. So they don't occupy any moral high ground in relation to the Gentiles. Yes, they have advantages in being part of the covenant community and especially the advantage of having the Old Testament scriptures because it reveals God's mind to them.

[15 : 09] But their Jewishness could not put them in the right with God. They were sinners just like the Gentiles. Now I'm cutting a long story short, but look on now to chapter 3, verse 9, as Paul drives his point home.

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged, we've already laid the accusation, that all, both Jews and Greeks, Greeks means Gentiles, are under sin.

As it is written, none is righteous, no, not one. Now isn't that an indictment of the human race?

No one righteous, not one, not one, not one justice of the peace, not one school teacher, not one hard-working mother and wife, not one philanthropist, not one nurse, not one bus driver, not one politician, not one preacher.

Paul goes on, verse 11, no one understands, no one seeks for God, all have turned aside, together they have become worthless, no one does good, not even one.

[16 : 34] Well, of course, the anger of God rests upon us, if that is true. We are condemned by the law of the Old Testament. And what is the result? Verse 19 tells us, Now we know that whatever the law, the Old Testament 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.

So the law of God, the law of the Old Testament, condemns us. We read its requirements and we realize that we have fallen short of them woefully and repeatedly.

Lawbreaker is our middle name. So every mouth is stopped, Paul says, or silenced. In other words, in God's law court, when the evidence is read out against us, so weighty and so overwhelming is it that we have nothing to say in self-defense.

Our mouths are stopped. Our condemnation is so obviously just that we're speechless. Verse 20 makes the point that we cannot live a righteous life by trying to keep God's law.

The law doesn't encourage us or give us hope. All it does is to make us bleakly conscious of our sin and of God's anger against it.

[17 : 53] Is it possible that we can be forgiven? Verse 21, but now, but now, a righteousness from God apart from the law has been manifested.

And at verse 21, the good news begins and we'll come on to that in just a moment. But let me just re-emphasize what I said a moment ago. Turn back to chapter 1, verses 15 to 18.

It is just so remarkable, so remarkable, that Paul should begin to talk about the gospel, the good news, so eagerly in verses 15, 16 and 17.

And then, he launches, without a moment's warning, into this harrowing exposition of the wrath of God at verse 18, bringing us finally to his conclusion in the middle of chapter 3 that the world is speechless before God.

Now, we have to know that before we can begin to appreciate how good the good news is. We have to look into the abyss. We have to look down into the pit of hell and realize that we deserve to be there before we shall know in our souls what a wonderful thing it is to be rescued.

[19 : 05] So, verse 21, but now, and he means now in the coming of Jesus, with the arrival of Jesus, a righteousness from God apart from the law has been manifested.

So, despite the law's condemnation, despite our sin, a way of being put in the right with God has been revealed. And today, I want us just to notice one thing about this righteous status or this way of righteousness.

We'll look at other things in the coming weeks. So, here's our one thing for today. This status of being righteous in God's sight is ours or can be ours by faith in Jesus Christ.

You see how Paul puts it in verse 22. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Now, when Paul talks here in this context about faith in Christ, in Jesus Christ, he means something quite specific and particular.

When he speaks of faith in Jesus Christ, he's not talking about believing that Jesus Christ exists. And he's not talking about believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

[20 : 19] He assumes that we already understand and accept those things. When he writes of faith in Jesus Christ, he's making a contrast. He's contrasting faith in Jesus Christ with faith in our own efforts at keeping God's law.

So he's forcing us to examine our own hearts and to ask ourselves what our confidence is resting on. Does our confidence rest upon Jesus Christ as our Savior or on our own efforts at keeping the law of God?

Now, by nature, by instinct, we always want to rely upon our own efforts. You think of your natural reaction when somebody challenges you and suggests that, in some way, you're not up to the mark.

Don't you immediately bristle and draw yourself up to your full height and prepare to say something like, I disagree with you strongly? You see it in all walks of life.

An England batsman, a cricketer, might be challenged by an interviewer on the radio. The interviewer says to him, your batting form has dipped a great deal this season, hasn't it? No, it hasn't.

[21 : 28] Replies the cricketer, bristling in self-defense. Or a politician is challenged by an interviewer on the television. Your party's record over the last couple of years has been abysmal in such and such an area of policy, hasn't it?

I mean, go on, admit it. But does he admit it? Pigs will fly before he admits any such thing. Well, let's bring this home to ourselves. You're at work in your workplace and you've just finished some project and somebody is very critical of the work that you've just done.

What do you do? Self-justification. It's our natural mode of defense, isn't it? Now, that's the way we are with each other, but it's just the way we are naturally with God. Self-justification is our normal, instinctive mode of trying to relate to God.

I've done well, we bristle. But in speaking to God like that, we are trying to claim that we have observed his law satisfactorily.

So our faith is not in Jesus Christ. It's in our own efforts at law-keeping. Now, this is why to become a Christian is so humbling. It involves admitting that we are in the wrong, that we haven't kept God's law.

[22 : 43] It involves admitting that we are weak, helpless, lost, and needing to be rescued. It involves coming to the point in life where we look at ourselves and we say, I have made a thorough mess of things.

I've not kept God's law. Morally, I'm a disaster area. I've broken God's law in 10,000 different places. I've ignored him. I've treated him as a person of minimal importance.

I'm a sinner. I'm condemned under his wrath, and rightly so. But it's when we've reached that low point that point of despair, that point of self-knowledge.

When we fear the wrath of God, we then read this part of Romans 3, and we realize that a way of being in the right with God is available.

Now, it comes from God, not from us. It involves abandoning our efforts at self-justification and self-saving, and we realize with unspeakable relief that we can trust Christ as our Savior and no longer need to try and trust our miserable and pathetic efforts at morality.

[23 : 54] And our tears of despair become tears of joy. So let me ask, friends, do you know in your experience what I'm talking about?

Have you traveled this fruitless road of trying and trying and trying to be a Christian? Trying to keep God's law?

Have you come to the point of despair, perhaps even of tears and broken heart, the point where you realize that you can never do it, you can never obey him properly?

Well, if you have come to that point, throw your hat in the air for joy, because you've come to the point of abandoning your effort to save yourself by your own sweat, you realize that you can't.

Look again at verse 20. For by works of the law, that's efforts at morality and so on, no human being, no human being will be justified in his sight.

[24 : 58] It's impossible that way. But now, verse 21, a righteousness from God has been manifested, has been made known to the despairing world.

A righteousness from God available, how? Through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. It is so delightfully simple.

All we have to do is abandon our efforts at saving ourselves and put our trust in Christ as our Saviour. If you've never done that, will you do it?

Will you do it even today? Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. how we thank you, our dear Heavenly Father, that you have not abandoned the human race because of our sinfulness, but you have sent us a rescuer, the Lord Jesus.

And you've shown us here in the Bible that a way of being put right with you, forgiven, accepted, has been made known to the world. How we thank you too that our own efforts and works could never get us to you, but you have sent us this wonderful Saviour, your Son, so that we should believe in him and thus be in the right with you.

[26 : 35] So we pray that you'll have mercy upon each one of us, dear Heavenly Father, and help us indeed to trust, not our efforts, not our work, but the Lord Jesus.

And we pray it for his name's sake. Amen.