

Being Right with God (3)

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: 05 March 2008

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's turn together to the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 3. You'll find that in our Pew Bibles on page 941. 941.

This is the third and last of a little series of talks that we're having. On the short paragraph, Romans 3, verses 21 to 26.

I haven't been able to cover all of those great verses by any means in three fairly short sermons.

But we're going to concentrate particularly today on verses 24 and 25.

But I'll read from verse 19 to verse 26. Romans, Chapter 3, verse 19. 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. But now, the righteousness of God, or perhaps better, a righteousness from God, has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.

[1 : 22] A righteousness from 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.

This is the word of the Lord, and may the Lord add his blessing to it. Well now, over the last couple of Wednesdays, some of you I know won't have been here, but what we've been doing is to look at this phrase from the Apostle Paul, a righteousness from God, which comes in Romans 3.21, and again in verse 22.

And this phrase, a righteousness from God, means a status which is the Christian's permanent privilege, a status of being in the right with God, a status declared now, and which will be shown to be so at the day of judgment.

I'm sure we've got that firmly in our minds. Now today I want to move on to verses 24 and 5, so that we can see more clearly how this righteous status has been given to Christian believers by God.

[2 : 59] We saw last week from verse 22 that Paul tells us its origin, it comes from God. He tells us its channel, it comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

And he tells us its object, it comes to all who believe. But the Apostle Paul is thorough, and he's not content to leave the matter there. He's impelled to say more.

So just to pick it up again from the end of verse 22, there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified, this is how the righteous status is given to Christians, 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.

Now I want to spend our time today looking at two fundamentally important gospel words, which Paul brings into focus in this passage.

And these are the words redemption in verse 24 and propitiation in verse 25. Now the fact is we can't avoid the long words of the Bible.

[4 : 09] There are a number of difficult words in the Bible, aren't there? But they are well worth looking at and thinking about. Sometimes we can see words of this kind, like propitiation, or justification, or atonement, or reconciliation, or whatever.

And possibly in our thinking, we tend to put them into a pigeonhole, which is marked difficult to be attended to in 20 years' time. But we haven't all got 20 years' time, have we?

We can't afford to do that. There is so much richness and loveliness and truth in these things. It's a little bit, I think, like unwrapping a very fine piece of well-wrapped cheese.

Just imagine the best piece of camembert that you've ever had, wrapped in about four layers of wrapping. And you want to get to the cheese, don't you? But it's a bit daunting because of these layers of wrapping.

But once you have got through the layers of wrapping, you are then on target, aren't you? And your desires are fulfilled as you put the cheese on your biscuit and into your mouth. So let's tackle the wrapping, and I trust we'll find the cheese.

[5 : 10] These words may seem long, but they're worth working at. Now verse 23, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption.

There's our word that comes by Christ Jesus or in Christ Jesus. Now the simple meaning, the fundamental meaning of the word redemption is buying back. You possess something, you lose it, it slips out of your grasp, and then you have to buy it back if it is to be yours again.

Now this is an idea which comes deep in the Old Testament. So for example, in the book of Leviticus, there are detailed regulations about the way in which Jewish people could dedicate parts of their property to the Lord, perhaps a house or a field or a farm animal.

But the man who dedicated a field could later redeem it. So we read in Leviticus 27 verse 19, If the man who dedicates the field wishes to redeem it, he must add a fifth to its value, and then the field will again become his.

So let's say the field was worth a thousand shekels, he'd then have to put down twelve hundred, he'd had to add twenty percent, a fifth of the value, and then he could buy it back again. Now Romans 3.24, we were justified, Christian believers were justified, given this status of being in the right with God through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[6 : 40] So just as the owner of the field came and paid a price so as to buy back his field, so Jesus came into the world to pay a price so as to buy back you and me.

That's how much we're valued. We had slipped away from him. We were out of touch with him, lost. But he paid more than twelve hundred shekels for us.

It's put like this beautifully in 1 Peter chapter 1. It was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

So the price of our redemption was his blood, that is to say his death. Now on the merely human level, I wonder if there's anybody here for whom some other person laid down their life.

It doesn't happen very often, but it can and it certainly hasn't happened to me. But I remember hearing stories from the World Wars, particularly the First World War, where perhaps there would be a group of soldiers in a trench and a hand grenade would come over from the enemy lines and land in the trench.

[7 : 55] And this group of five or six men would see it there on the floor of the trench and somebody realised it would go off within about two seconds. And one man would throw himself on top of the hand grenade and take the full blast into his own body so as to save the life of his comrades.

And that certainly happened on a number of occasions. And those men, the survivors, would look back forever with gratitude to that particular individual who was prepared to lay down his life in order to save theirs.

Now Jesus has bought our lives like that at cost of his own life. And to my mind, I don't know whether you agree with me, but to my mind, this is far and away the biggest cause for gratitude in any Christian's heart.

There's a great deal to be grateful to God for. The creation, for example, is very wonderful. If you've been looking at the little crocuses and daffodils coming up in the last few days and weeks as the spring comes, your heart rises, doesn't it?

And you think this wonderful miracle is happening again. And think of the other things that God has made. Think of the constellations, the galaxies, think of the Himalayas, think of the duck-billed platypus, think of our own lives, our friendships, our families, our work and play, think of art and science and technology and medicine, wonderful things, enormous causes of gratitude.

[9 : 17] but to my mind, they pale into insignificance by comparison with this thing, our redemption. I think in the churches, churches, generally speaking, there tend to be two main ways of understanding the cross.

and you'll find this in sermons and Christian books in this country. And there's really a great divide between the two. First, there's the view, which I think is mistaken, that Jesus died on the cross, primarily, as an example for us to follow.

Now, people who hold this view will say, look at Jesus. He faced opposition resolutely. For the sake of what he believed, he was prepared to resist the Jewish authorities to the point of death.

In fact, so true was he to his cause that he laid down his life in its service. What an example. We must rise up and do the same. Now, I don't want to deny all truth to that approach because there is an exemplary aspect to the death of Jesus.

In fact, Peter, the Apostle Peter, in his first letter, draws this out and makes quite a bit of it. He's encouraging persecuted Christians, especially in his second chapter, to stand firm under persecution, precisely because Jesus did.

[10:37] So he is saying, look at the example of your master and do the same. So there is an exemplary aspect to his death. But if we say that that is the main thing, the central point of it, we're implying that Jesus and we are in the same category.

Ah yes, he may be a bit higher up on a graded scale of human achievement, but at least we're on the same scale. He did it, we can imitate him. Now surely the point is that we cannot imitate Jesus because he has done for us something that we could never have done.

He has done something that we were quite powerless, impotent, to do for ourselves. If you look across to Romans 5, verse 6, you'll see how Paul expresses it. For while we were still weak, helpless, powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

And let me try and put this as clearly as I can. In one respect, and this is a comparatively minor respect, we can imitate the Lord Jesus and the New Testament encourages us to do so.

We can imitate him in being prepared to suffer hardship and if necessary, death for his sake. And in that respect, countless Christians have imitated him and still do to this very day.

[11:56] But the more important thing is that by his death he has done something for us that we were totally powerless to do for ourselves. His death has purchased us, redeemed us, from a position of lostness to a position of being found.

Now we could not do that for ourselves and to suggest that we could dishonor Jesus and cast a slur on his achievement. Do you see why there is such a divide between these two views?

The first view doesn't take account of our moral impotence and helplessness. It doesn't take our lostness seriously. It suggests that we have within us the power to rise up and follow the example of Jesus.

But the second view, and I am sure this is the central view of the New Testament, pictures us as desperate, helpless. And if we are not decisively redeemed by the work of Jesus, then we are indeed lost beyond redemption.

So friends, do be on the lookout for this alternative view of the meaning of the death of Jesus. It's around and it's quite strong in some places, but it is a misleading thing. Let me pass on to you a simple illustration of the meaning of redemption.

[13:14] I got this from somebody years ago and some of you will have heard this before, but I think it bears repetition. It tells the story of a little boy who was preparing to go for his summer holidays to Scarborough.

He was a Glasgow boy, but his mum and dad said we'll go to Scarborough for our holidays to the sandy seashore. And the little boy was very keen on sailing and before he went on his holiday he spent a week or two building a beautiful little boat.

He was a skillful boy. So he got the wood and he planed it down, he cut it to just the right shape, screwed it all together, painted it, even painted the name tag on the very back, SS River Clyde.

And he and his mother and father went off to Scarborough for their summer holidays and on the very first day he took his boat down to the seashore and he placed it on the water and he enjoyed watching it sail around.

But then a gust of wind came offshore and blew it out to sea and he couldn't swim and it was beyond his grasp and he was heartbroken. Now a couple of days later he was walking down the main street in Scarborough and there was a second hand shop the sort of shop that sells old teapots and kettles and stuffed badgers in glass cases and that kind of thing.

[14:28] And there displayed in the front window of the shop was his boat SS River Clyde. He was delighted that there was a price tag of ten pounds on it. So he felt in his pocket ten pounds was his total holiday allowance, his pocket money.

But he went straight into the shop, he went to the shop man, he put his ten pounds on the counter and he bought back his beautiful boat. And as he went outside into the sunshine he looked at the boat and he said to his boat my beautiful boat you are mine now twice over.

First because I made you and second because when you were lost I bought you back again. Now I think that well describes, well illustrates the double way in which the Christian belongs to the Lord God.

we are his first because he made us and second when we were lost and this in a sense seals that bond we are his because we have been bought back by him.

God created us just with a word but it cost him very much more dearly to redeem us. How he values and treasures us therefore. John Bunyan the famous Bedford tinker wrote these words in prison in his autobiography which was first published in 1666 and he is talking here about his conversion.

[15:47] As I was walking up and down in the house as a man in a most woeful state that word of God took hold of my heart ye are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3.24 But oh what a turn it made upon me. Now I was as one awakened out of some troublesome sleep and dream and listening to this heavenly sentence I was as if I had heard it thus expounded to me.

Sinner thou thinkest that because of thy sins and infirmities I cannot save thy soul but behold my son is beside me and upon him I look and not on thee and I will deal with thee according as I am pleased with him.

Now just one other thing about redemption before we move on. Romans 3.24 says that through this redemption we are justified freely. It comes by his grace as a gift.

It's free. Now that does not mean that it cost God nothing. It means that it costs us nothing. This righteous status is free to us.

[17:02] So for it to be ours we have neither to pay a penny nor to serve a penance. There is nothing that we have to do. I think it's a little bit unfortunate that there's so much in modern advertising these days that is offering us free gifts.

We get letters in the post the junk mail free this free that and as soon as we see it we say it can't be. So our minds are predisposed to think that something that says that it's free cannot possibly be free.

And we say surely if it's worth having I've got to earn it. So metaphorically speaking the unbeliever who is thinking that it would be rather nice to be on good terms with God the unbeliever metaphorically speaking goes to work he goes jogging he works up a sweat I must earn my way to heaven I must do sufficient good before I die so that I can outbalance my bad deeds and then I might establish a sufficient claim on God for him to let me into heaven at the end.

Isn't that the attitude we can have before we're converted before we're Christians? Why are we like this by nature? Isn't it just a form of pride?

I can't accept charity that's only for people who are in the gutter at their wits end or whatever oh no no no I must get to heaven under my own steam and so people try to establish a claim upon God but God's nature is such and our nature is such that we can never put him in our debt it is his pleasure to give us eternal life as a free gift and that's why it's so humbling to become a Christian that's why the Christian's face is a soft face a softened face you know people's faces can give so much away can't they?

[18:45] It's the hard face which is still saying God owes me something it's the softened face the humbled face the face that's more ready to drop its eyes than to thrust out its chin that's the face that acknowledges that God can never owe me anything the debt is all the other way round if we're justified at all we're justified freely God has borne the cost in full and we have to pay nothing all we have to do is humbly to accept the offered gift well let's look on now to verse 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood now this verse has been described as the acropolis of the Bible and of the Christian faith the high point if you like and I'll try my best to explain why the word propitiation means something which turns anger away and as we read the early part of Romans

I think it's clear that the human race is by nature under the anger of God Paul spells this out very clearly in fact Paul is really making one major point between Romans 1.18 and Romans 3.20 and that is that God is angry with the human race the apostle lists and describes the sins of the Gentiles in the second half of chapter 1 and then in chapters 2 and 3 his aim is to help the Jew to see that despite his privileges he is equally under the anger of God he knows the law but he's failed to keep

it if then there is to be a future for the human race some means has to be found for turning God's anger aside his anger needs to be propitiated now this word propitiation can bring difficulties for some people because it can conjure up associations with pagan religion just to give an example from very ancient history from about 1000 BC from the legends of the Trojan War Princess Helen the beautiful Princess Helen has been carried off to Troy across the Aegean Sea by Prince Paris and so to rescue her Agamemnon the Greek general sets off by ship from Greece with a task force but they only get halfway across the Aegean Sea when contrary winds blow in their face and they can't go any further so clearly according to their world view the gods need to be propitiated so Agamemnon sends for his daughter and he offers her as a human sacrifice and that did the trick the gods were evidently appeased because west winds began to blow they were able to sail across without difficulty now this is the pagan idea the gods are a capricious bunch somewhat irresponsible but powerful all the same so you've got to keep on the right side of them but the problem is they take offence at the smallest thing and quickly get jealous if you start paying too much attention to other gods or other people and then they take it out on you by making your circumstances and life very difficult so all you can do to mollify them and humour them is to make an offering and the rule is the bigger the offering the better things are going to work out for you human sacrifice particularly such as Agamemnon resorted to is costly but it's very effective so this kind of paganism is really nothing more than a cunning system of bribery and manipulation playing off one god against another so as to get your own way so it's the human being who pulls the strings now that kind of pagan thinking about propitiation is of course a horrible distortion of what the bible teaches about the real god but I imagine many of us will have read pagan legends of that kind and a concept of propitiation may have formed in our minds which is to some extent that kind of concept unworthy and misleading pagan ideas so when we read Romans 3.25 we say does the real wonderful god need propitiating as if he was Zeus or Apollo or Athene now the odd thing is that although this pagan understanding has no place in Christianity propitiation is right at the heart of the Christian faith usually those who don't like to think that the real god needs propitiating are people who don't like to think that the real god is angry because the two things go together well of course if his anger is a figment of our imagination then he doesn't in reality need to be propitiated but if his anger is real then the need for propitiation is equally real his anger must be turned away but Romans 3.25 shows us something which immediately distinguishes biblical propitiation from pagan propitiation in the pagan system who propitiates the offended gods the answer is you and I the punter we're the ones who have to make the sacrifice we're the ones who have to do something in order to get some leverage onto the gods but look at verse 25 here who takes the initiative there so as to provide the propitiation God does it is he who put forward Jesus as a propitiation by his blood God the father presented Jesus as the propitiation and this is all of a piece with Romans 3.24 we're justified freely it's at no cost to us at all and it's the same with the propitiation it is free God provides the sacrifice we provide nothing as Abraham once said to his little son Isaac God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son and he did sometimes when you hear good-hearted Christians preaching the gospel they might try to force a wedge between God the father and God the son I think I've heard preaching like this years ago they'll picture a stern father who is somehow deeply reluctant to forgive and then the son as it were comes to the father pleading showing the father his own blood reminding his father of the cross and saying please father for my sake and because [25 : 24] I've shed my blood on the cross for that reason if for no other please forgive them I don't know whether you've heard gospel preaching like that it's well intentioned but it isn't right there's no wedge there's no distance between father and son the father's will and the son's will are in perfect harmony and that's what this verse is teaching it doesn't say that Jesus offered himself in the hope of persuading his unwilling father to forgive it says that God the father took the initiative and he presented Jesus or put him forth as a propitiation so what does this propitiation achieve it means that the God who was angry with us is no longer angry with us his anger has been fully turned away it means that we can walk out of this building onto the pavement of Bath Street and jump for joy we can say as the prophet Isaiah did in chapter 12

I will praise you oh lord although you were angry with me your anger has turned away and you have comforted me the old testament blood sacrifices in which the priest presents sacrificial blood in the holy place all those for all those centuries were given by God as a ceremonial or symbolic cleansing from sin and those sacrifices were a preparation for the real the really effective sacrifice that was to

come centuries later as Calvin puts it Paul informs us that in Christ there was exhibited in reality that which was given figuratively to the Jews it was pictured for them but when Christ came it's the real thing that's what Calvin means so this friends is for real this is for real once we believe in Jesus our sins have been removed by his propitiatory death and they've been really removed in a double sense a double sense first our sin has been taken away from our conscience where it may well have been lying like a millstone for many years removed from there but secondly our sin has been removed from the very presence of God it is as though it had never been behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world takes it away over the horizon gone forever do you believe that it is a very wonderful thing let's bow our heads and we'll pray together 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 indeed our dear father we receive this by faith how we thank you for taking the initiative and sending your son into the world giving him giving him up to death so that your righteous anger might be truly and fully turned away you are a gracious God and we cannot fully understand how loving you have been towards us we just begin to perceive it and we pray that you'll write these great truths on our hearts on our consciences and that you will transform our lives by them and we ask it in Jesus name Amen