

The righteousness of God from faith

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. We do indeed ask you, dear Father, to send your Holy Spirit to be our teacher and our guide and to take his words, the words of the Scriptures, to apply them to our hearts, to our understanding and to bring to us real blessing.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I was brought up near London, London, England, and in the garden of our old family home there was a split orange clay drainage pipe which served as a drinking trough for the family chickens.

And when I was about five years old, a frog made his home in this drinking trough. Now my father discovered the presence of this frog and he rather liked the frog and he called him Freddy.

And every evening, my father used to commute into London to work and every evening he would come back in the summer months at about seven o'clock in the evening and having returned from work, he rather enjoyed walking up the garden and looking at Freddy as he hopped around in and out of the trough.

One day, before my father came home from work, aged about five, I found a strong stick, I took it to the trough and I killed the frog with my stick.

[1 : 3 8] My father found out and he was very sorry about what I'd done but he wasn't over harsh with me, I guess because he'd been a little boy himself once and knew what little boys can do.

A year or two later, I was at school aged six or seven and one day I was playing out in the schoolyard with some of my friends and there was one little boy, a friend of mine called Miles Davis who had a very nice toy.

This was a model of a car's wheel. The rubber tread on the tyre was beautifully moulded and in the centre of the wheel was a shiny hubcap with the word Renault written on it.

During break time, the children were called in for their regular glass of milk and Miles Davis had hung his little car wheel up on the hedge on a stick. I stayed behind.

I didn't go in for my milk. I waited by the garden hedge and when nobody was looking, I stole the wheel and took it home in my pocket. Over the coming years, I broke all of the Ten Commandments and I learned how to do so with such a measure of skill and subtlety that I was regarded by my teachers at school as a good little boy.

[2 : 5 8] Then teenage came on and I was able to manufacture complex and innovative ways of breaking the Ten Commandments. The seeds which had lain dormant in childhood now began to sprout.

Seeds of vanity and pride and self-absorption, narcissism, not to mention greed, covetousness, lust and idolatry in a hundred different forms.

I wonder if my personal story resonates at all with yours. We are lawbreakers. Can we expect God to be anything but displeased with us?

Can we be welcomed and accepted by a holy God when we have willfully broken his laws? Is it possible that we can be forgiven?

Let's turn to Romans chapter 3 and verse 21. Now you'll see that Romans 3, 21 begins with the words but now.

[4 : 10] Now that is a very significant but now in the Bible. It's one of the great but nows of the Bible in which what follows is in stark contrast to what goes before.

So if we're going to feel the force of verses 21 to 26 and that's really our passage for this morning we need first to grasp what the Apostle Paul was saying prior to chapter 3 verse 21.

So let me spend a few minutes summarising the thrust of the first two and a half chapters of Romans. Perhaps you turn with me back a page to chapter 1. Romans chapter 1.

Now after his opening remarks and greetings and so on Paul tells the Roman Christians in chapter 1 verse 15 that he is eager to preach the gospel to them in Rome. And what does the gospel do?

what he tells them in the very next verse in verse 16. He says it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes to the Jew and to the Greek that's Jew or Gentile.

[5 : 11] Why? Because verse 17 in the gospel something is revealed. Now look at verse 17 to see what is revealed. First of all righteousness.

Then righteousness from God. And how is this appropriated by us? It is by faith. It is revealed from faith for faith.

And when Paul says by faith what he means is not by work or hard effort on our part. Now having seen those things in verse 17 we need to understand what Paul means by a righteousness from God.

I know it's translated here in verse 17 as the righteousness of God and in chapter 3 verse 21 it's the same the righteousness of God but actually that phrase ought to be translated a righteousness from God.

There's no definite article there in the original Greek and I think to translate it the righteousness of God is rather misleading. What Paul is writing about here is not so much an attribute of God's person which would be true if he'd written the righteousness of God.

[6 : 19] He's writing more about a gift that comes from God to believing men and women. What he means by this righteousness from God is a status 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.

So to people like us who ask and I hope we do ask this is it possible for us to be forgiven? The gospel reveals that God has provided a status in his sight whereby we are counted as righteous on the day of judgment and are thus forgiven.

Now Paul is determined that the Roman Christians should understand the gospel fully and you'll see that that key phrase a righteousness from God in chapter 1 verse 17 is the very phrase that reappears in chapter 3 verse 21 so it's Paul's theme at this early part of the letter but Paul is not prepared to jump straight from chapter 1 verse 17 to chapter 3 verse 21 because something else has to be faced and explained and accepted in the meantime and if we don't face it and understand it we will never grasp the gospel except in a rather superficial way.

So Paul takes us straight into it at chapter 1 verse 18 where he says for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

And between that 18th verse and the end of chapter 1 Paul details human sin in its core forms. The denial and suppression of God's truth the manufacture and worship of idols sexual unchastity and we should note in the context of modern discussion that that includes male and female homosexual practice in verses 26 and 7.

[8 : 22] Then we have the list of sins from verses 29 to 31 and against all these things verse 18 says the wrath of God is being revealed.

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

What I mean is this God's wrath is not capricious unpredictable anger like the anger that sometimes flares up in our own hearts. Our anger when we give way to it is volatile and selfish and wrong we know that.

But God's anger is always right and righteous. His anger means his settled permanent hostility to everything that is wrong. Now as I say we should be very glad that he's like that.

If he were for instance angry with murder and adultery one day but not angry with it the next we wouldn't know where we were up to with him. We'd be morally at sea.

[9 : 26] The universe would not be morally stable. But we know exactly what he thinks about murder and adultery and truth suppression and deceit. He is against them always every day.

But while we can be thankful for his constant anger against human sin we are at the same time condemned by it because we are by nature idolaters and truth suppressors and adulterers and deceivers.

In Romans chapter 2 Paul particularly addresses his Jewish readers because he knew that for centuries they had regarded themselves as morally superior to Gentiles.

But Paul tells them in chapter 2 that although they have the Old Testament law they are not law keepers as they fondly think they are law breakers. So they don't occupy any moral high ground.

Yes they had advantages in being part of the covenant community especially the advantage of having the Old Testament because it revealed God's mind to them. But their Jewishness could never put them in the right with God.

[10 : 35] 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. We've already made the charge that all, both Jews and Greeks are under sin. As it is written none is righteous.

No, not one. Now friends think of that. None is righteous. Not one. What an indictment of the human race that is. Not one righteous person, not one justice of the peace is righteous.

Not one school teacher, not one hard-working mother and wife, not one philanthropist, not one single nurse, not one bus driver, not one politician, not one preacher is righteous.

Paul goes on in verses 11 and 12. No one understands. No one seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they have become worthless.

[11 : 43] No one does good, not even one. Well if this is true of course the anger of God rightly rests upon all of us. We're condemned by the law of the Old Testament.

And what is the result? Verse 19 tells us. 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.

The law of God, the law of the Old Testament, condemns us. That's what Paul is saying here in verse 19. We read its requirements and we realise that we have fallen short of them woefully and repeatedly.

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

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.

[12 : 55] The law doesn't encourage us. The law doesn't give us hope. All it does is to make us bleakly conscious of our sin and of God's anger against it.

Is it possible that we could be forgiven? Verse 21. But now, a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known.

So at verse 21, the good news begins. It is very good, and we'll come on to it 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 that Paul should begin to talk about the gospel, the good news, so eagerly in verses 15 and 16 and 17. I'm eager to preach.

I'm not ashamed of the gospel. For in it, the righteousness or a righteousness from God is revealed. And then he launches, without a moment's warning, into this harrowing exposition of the wrath of God, verse 18, bringing us to this conclusion at the middle of chapter 3 that the world is speechless before God.

[14 : 09] Now, friends, we have to know that. We have to understand that before we can begin to appreciate how good the good news of the gospel is. We have to look into the abyss.

We have to look down, as it were, 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 by Christ.

Verse 21, but now. And when he says now, he means since the coming of Jesus, in the coming of Jesus. A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known.

So, despite the law's condemnation, and despite our sin, a way of being in the right with God has been revealed. So, let's look together at this wonderful paragraph, verses 21 to 26.

A paragraph described by the Australian Leon Morris, the theologian Leon Morris, as the most important paragraph ever written. Well, this paragraph describes this righteousness from God.

[15 : 13] So, let me draw out three lessons about it, which Paul teaches. First, it is ours by faith in Jesus Christ. There it is in verse 22.

The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Now, when Paul talks in this context about faith in Jesus Christ, he means something quite specific and particular.

He does not mean believing that Jesus Christ exists. He takes that as already read and understood. Nor does he mean believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Again, he assumes that we already understand that and accept it. When he writes of faith in Jesus Christ, he is making a contrast. He is contrasting faith in Jesus Christ with faith in our own efforts at keeping God's law.

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

[16 : 23] Now, by nature and by instinct, we will always want to rely upon our own efforts. That is our heart. Just think of your natural reaction when somebody challenges you and suggests that you are not quite up to the mark in some way.

Don't you immediately bristle and draw yourself up to your full height and prepare to say something like, I disagree with you? You see it in all walks of life, don't you? An England cricketer, for example, may be challenged by an interviewer and the interviewer says to him, your batting form has dipped a great deal this season, hasn't it?

No, it hasn't, replies the cricketer, bristling in self-defence. Or think of our politicians. A politician may be challenged on the television again by an interviewer. Your party's record over the last two years has been abysmal in such and such an area of policy, hasn't it?

I mean, come on, admit it. But does he admit it? Pigs will fly across Glasgow before this politician is prepared to admit anything of the sort. Well, let's think of the way we sometimes are at work.

Somebody criticises a piece of work that we've done in our office or place of work. Self-justification is our natural reaction, our natural mode of defence, isn't it? Now, it's just the same in our relationship with God.

[17 : 39] 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're trying to claim that we have observed his law satisfactorily.

So our faith is not in Jesus Christ as our saviour, but in our own efforts at law-keeping. Haven't I done well? This is why becoming a Christian is such a humbling thing.

There may be some people here today, I hope there are, who are thinking of becoming a Christian, a follower of Christ. But you know that to do this, you will have to admit that you're in the wrong, that you haven't kept God's law.

It involves admitting that we're weak and helpless and lost, despite our outward appearance, and that we need to be rescued. It involves coming to the point in life where we look at ourselves and we say, I have made a big 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 places. I've ignored him. I've treated him as a person of minimal importance.

[18 : 51] I'm a sinner, condemned under his wrath, and rightly so. But it's when we have reached that very low point, that point of real despair, that point of self-knowledge, where we fear the wrath of God, we then read this passage in Romans 3 and we realise that a way of being put in the right with God is available to us.

It comes from God. It doesn't come from us. It involves abandoning our efforts at self-justification or self-saving. And we realise with unspeakable relief that we can trust Christ as our saviour and no longer need to try and trust our miserable, pathetic efforts at morality.

And it's at that point that our tears of despair turn into tears of joy. So that's the first thing. This righteousness from God is ours by faith in Jesus Christ, but not by faith in our own efforts at law-keeping.

Then secondly, this righteousness from God involves our redemption by Jesus Christ. Let me read from the last part of verse 22 here.

For there is no distinction, he means between the Jew and the Gentile, 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, now here's the phrase, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

[20 : 21] Now the idea behind redemption is a very simple idea. Redemption literally means buying something back. So you possessed something, you lost possession of it for some reason, and then you bought it back at a price.

In doing so, you redeemed it. It was yours, you lost it, but at a cost it became yours again. Now the story of the Bible is the story of God and man mutually possessing each other.

It perhaps sounds a little bit odd to put it like that, but the Bible covenant, the great bond at the heart of the Bible, does put it like that. Because in the covenant, God says to his people, you are my people, here's the mutual possession, you are my people and I am your God.

I possess you as my people, but you also possess me as your God. Now that's the eternal reality at the heart of this great relationship, God's relationship with his people.

But in history, this mutual possession was blown apart when Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The man and the woman who had possessed God and whom God had possessed then became estranged from him and they were expelled from his presence, expelled from the Garden of Eden.

[21 : 39] They were no longer possessed by him. So they left the sphere of his possession and they became possessed instead by sin as their master, rebellion against God.

Having obeyed the devil in the Garden of Eden and disobeyed God, they transferred their allegiance from God to the evil one. And forever afterwards, the human race has been in bondage to sin and the devil.

This explains, incidentally, why we never have to teach our children how to be naughty and rebellious. They know it by instinct. They were born that way like their parents, in bondage to sin and rebellion.

My wife and I have discovered that we have to spend about 20 years teaching our children how to be good but we have never had to spend so much as 20 minutes teaching them how to be naughty. There's something in our nature.

It's rebellion, anarchy. We're anarchists. But to this situation, to a world in bondage to anarchy, Jesus came and he purchased us back from sin's possession at the price of his life.

[22 : 46] It was his death on the cross that redeemed us, that brought us back, that we might be possessed again by him and by God the Father. Let me illustrate this by a simple story.

A little boy made a model of a beautiful boat. He measured the boat, the wood, carefully. He planed it down. He fitted it. He screwed it together.

He painted it. He even put a name in paint on the stern of the boat in his own handwriting. SS Black Pig. And then he went on holiday to Scarborough.

I think he must have been an English boy, mustn't he? He went to Scarborough for his holidays and on the very first day of his holidays he took his beautiful new boat down to the water's edge. He couldn't wait to use it. And for a moment it sailed and floated beautifully on the water.

He was enjoying it. And suddenly an offshore wind, a strong wind, blew up and carried his boat quickly beyond his reach and he couldn't swim. It was gone. He saw it sailing away and he thought I'm never going to see this boat again.

[23 : 50] He was heartbroken. But three days later as he was walking up the main street in Scarborough he passed a second hand shop. A shop full of odds and ends.

Old golf clubs. Teapots. Stuffed badges. You know the sort of thing that you find in these second hand shops. And to his amazement there in the display cabinet in the window was his boat priced at ten pounds.

Ten pounds. Ten pounds. That was the whole of his holiday money. But he rushed into the shop. He put the ten pounds down on the counter. He said, I want to buy that boat please. And he took it outside into the sunshine.

And as he took it outside he looked at it and he said to it, my beautiful boat, you're doubly mine now. You're mine twice over. You were mine when I made you.

And now you're mine again because I bought you back when you were lost. To be redeemed by Christ is therefore to be doubly his.

[24 : 53] His because he made us and his because he bought us back when we were lost and far from him. So this righteousness from God, this new status of being in the right with God is ours through the redemption that comes in Jesus.

Then thirdly, it involves the propitiation of God's wrath. Look with me at verse 25. Whom, that's Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

What Paul means is this, that God is angry with us and we know that from chapter 1 verse 18. And Paul refers to the wrath of God again in chapter 2 verse 5 and in chapter 3 verse 5.

So the consciousness of God's anger is pressing upon Paul as he writes these chapters. Now if God is angry with us, his anger must be turned away, averted, if we are not to be eternally condemned by it.

But how can God's anger be averted or propitiated? Is it enough for us just to tell him we're sorry? No, it's not. Our sin is far too serious to be dealt with just by an apology.

[26 : 12] In fact, Paul is teaching us here that there is nothing, nothing that we can do to turn God's anger away. What action of ours could ever be adequate to propitiate the righteous anger of God?

Could we achieve it by beating ourselves or dressing in sackcloth and ashes and living a life of rigorous self-denial? We can't turn his anger away by any action or effort on our part.

But Paul tells us here in this verse 25 that God has done for us what we were powerless to do for ourselves. We could take no initiative to propitiate the anger of God.

So God took the initiative himself. Do you see how it's phrased in verse 25? God put forward that was his initiative put Jesus forward as a propitiation by his blood.

So all the lambs and bulls and goats which had been sacrificed in the Old Testament were early models of the real sacrifice that was to come on the cross.

[27 : 17] The death of Jesus on the cross has turned God's anger away. And we need to understand this that when Jesus was nailed up on the cross he was representing you and me.

As he hung there all our rebellion all our defiance of God all our neglect of God all our pride and self-sufficiency all our vanity and hatred and greed and untruthfulness was as it were laid upon him and wrapped around him.

He bore our sin. And as he hung there God punished our sin. God satisfied to the full his anger against all our human rebellion.

Jesus bore the wrath of God on the cross until the wrath of God was exhausted and spent. And it was God himself who put forward Jesus as the propitiation.

What's our appropriate response to such a thing? Wonder. relief, thankfulness and great joy. The wrath of God has been propitiated.

[28 : 34] We couldn't propitiate it but God himself has supplied the sacrificial lamb at such cost both to the father and the son. So to sum up the ground we've covered this righteousness from God this new status of being counted in the right with God first of all it's ours by faith in Jesus Christ as we trust him secondly it involves our redemption by Jesus Christ and thirdly it involves the propitiation of God's wrath.

Where then does this leave us? Well it leaves us as the beginning of verse 24 puts it justified by his grace as a gift a gift.

Now I asked the question earlier is it possible for us to be forgiven? And the answer is wonderfully yes because Christ has taken all our sins to the cross and the gospel gives us even more than forgiveness it leaves us justified verse 24 by his grace as a gift.

Now justification that is a legal term in a law court the judge has two possible verdicts to hand down either guilty which leads to sentence and condemnation or not guilty which leads to acquittal or justification.

And the gospel is about God's verdict on us at the day of judgment at the final day. So if we hold out against him in defiant self-sufficiency his wrath is upon us and his verdict will be guilty.

[30 : 14] If anyone here is holding out against the Lord and saying I will not submit to him then the verdict will be guilty at the end. But if we accept by faith this wonderful redemption that is ours in Christ and the propitiation of God's anger that he himself arranged then his verdict on the last day will be justified acquitted freed.

So let me ask each one of you one or two direct questions. Are you a person who is forgiven? are you redeemed?

Are you justified? Has God's anger in your case been turned away and propitiated? It isn't difficult to know the answers to these questions.

Just imagine yourself on the day of judgment standing before God's judgment seat and God asks you on what ground do you seek admission to the kingdom of heaven?

How would you reply? Would you say well I've tried hard I've done my best I owe nothing to any man I've been a decent citizen?

[31 : 29] If you replied like that you'd be putting your trust in your own moral track record your faith would not be in Jesus as your saviour you'd be trusting yourself but if on the other hand you said to God I'm a sinful person I've not loved you with all my heart I've often ignored you I've neglected your laws but my faith is in Jesus Christ who bore your anger against me on my behalf who took my place on the cross now if that's what you said to God you would be a forgiven redeemed man or woman in April 1912 the survivors of the titanic disaster were floating on life rafts and flotsam on the surface of the Atlantic and a rescue ship the SS Carpathia steamed over the horizon to come and pick them up imagine yourself to have been one of those survivors it would have been a foolish thing to say to the captain of the rescue ship we don't need you thank you we can get to land by ourselves we too would be fools if we said no to the rescuer that

God has sent to us there is no one else who can rescue sinners from the wrath of God no one but now says Paul the apostle a righteousness from God a way of being put in the right with God has been made known it is available through faith in Jesus Christ if you've not yet put your faith in him will you do it let's bow our heads and we'll pray let's pray with you