

Being Right with God (2)

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[0 : 00] Well let's turn together friends to Romans chapter 3. This is the second of three Wednesdays when we're looking at a very short passage in the third chapter of Romans, verses 21 to 26.

I'm not quite sure that we're going to see our way right through it in just three rather short sessions. But that's our passage about the status of righteousness that God is able and willing to give to those who put their trust in Christ.

So let me read from verse 19 today to verse 26. Romans 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, 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.

A righteousness from God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, no distinction between Jew and Gentile, 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.

[1 : 41] 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.

Well, this is the word of the Lord, and may his blessing indeed rest upon it for us. Now today, I want particularly to look again at verse 22, where Paul describes a righteousness from God, which is available through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Now you may remember that Paul has announced in chapter 1 what the theme of his great letter is going to be. So he writes in chapter 1, verse 16, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

For in the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed. So in those two verses, Paul is, if you like, setting out his stall.

The gospel is my theme, and in it is made known a way of being put in the right with God. And then, as chapter 1 unfolds, Paul immediately begins to tell us why we need this righteousness from God.

[3 : 04] He tells us that we're sinners, sinners, and that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against human godlessness. And chapter 1, the second half of chapter 1, lists and details our sin.

Nothing that the newspapers tell us every day about what human beings are doing is outside the scope of Romans chapter 1. It's all there. And this is why God is angry with men and women.

Now, in chapter 2, and also chapter 3 up to verse 20, Paul argues that the Jew is in exactly the same predicament as the Gentile before God.

Most of Paul's Jewish contemporaries simply wouldn't have believed that. But Paul says to the Jews, you look in your own Bible, look in your own Old Testament, and see how it talks about human sin.

It's not talking just about the Gentiles. It's talking about us Jews. Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, Jew and Gentile alike, are all under sin, and therefore under God's wrath.

[4 : 12] So Paul's purpose, right up to the end of chapter 3, verse 20, is to bring all his readers, Jews and Gentiles alike, to the point where they see their plight.

Where, if you like, they're going to say, God is angry with me. I deserve his anger. I deserve hell. Is there any hope for me? Is there any hope for anybody?

But then, chapter 3, verse 21, proves to be the great turning point. It's like the moment when the night ends, and the sun comes up. You see, we've been reduced to a point where there is no hope.

And then Paul says, but now, now, in the coming of Christ, in his life and death, and resurrection, a way of being put in the right with God has been revealed. And if we say, has it?

How could it be? Is this really possible? You see, we've been looking into the pit. We've been on the edge of the abyss. We've felt like a man walking the plank who's got one pace to go.

[5 : 13] And then God says to us, there is a way of being put in the right with me. Now, this is good news, friends. There is a way of being put in the right. Now, let's just pause and savour this for a moment and think again about it with wonder.

Because I'm aware that many of you folk are Christians, not all perhaps, but many of you are Christians and you've been servants of the Lord in your churches for perhaps many years. And you know that it's easy to get bogged down, isn't it, and bowed down with Christian service, even when you're a Christian.

You see, we get conscious of pressures, don't we? I must get my Sunday school lesson properly prepared for the children on Sunday. I haven't sorted out the minutes for such and such a meeting. Oh, and I promised to visit dear old Mrs. So-and-so a fortnight ago and I still haven't done it.

We get so hemmed in with all our duties and little things of church life that we can forget the astonishing reality of what it's all about. But this, this righteous status from God, it's this that endures when meetings and Sunday schools and visiting commitments have long since disappeared.

What endures to eternity is the status of being in the right with God, which he gives to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Now, I find it quite a useful exercise to imagine what life might be like for me when I'm 90, if I live that long.

[6 : 37] I'll probably be living at that stage at flat number 14 at Ecclesiastica Rest Homes in Arbroath or somewhere like that where the sun shines.

And every morning a nurse, a kindly nurse will come into my room and say to me, and how are we this morning, Reverend Lobb? And I'll say, what did you say?

And she'll repeat, and how are you today? I'll say, there's no need to shout, I'm not deaf. Now, just imagine me at that stage if I'm still around. Everything active in life will have gone, won't it?

No more hiking in the hills, no more preaching, no more going to meetings, too blind to read, too deaf to hear music, even for meals. I'll just be picking up a lettuce leaf and a slice of Spam.

Not much of a life, is it? But in reality, it will be the unimportant things in life which will have vanished by then. The unimportant things.

[7 : 37] Why desperately cling on to youth and health and strength which cannot last? When God gives us an enduring position. In the words of Simon Peter, an inheritance that can never perish or spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you.

Or think of Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 15 where he talks about the death and resurrection of the believer. He says, the body is sown perishable. It is raised imperishable.

It is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness. It is raised in power. So if you are a believer, when you are 90, that is what you are on the brink of.

This unfading inheritance. It is a foolish butterfly that looks back at its shed chrysalis with regret. Isn't it?

But going back to Romans 3, 21 and 22, this is what Paul is talking about. He is talking about something which is enduringly yours and mine if we are believers. By nature, we are children of wrath.

[8 : 43] We lived under God's wrath. Our whole life was under his condemnation. Even our good deeds, even our best efforts, were like filthy rags in his sight.

To be not a Christian is to be east of Eden, banished. Just think back to that time in your life if you are a Christian. Maybe years ago, maybe quite recently.

But that was the time before you were a believer when you ran your own life according to your own lights. You didn't acknowledge anybody's authority to direct you.

At the end of the day, you did what you wanted and God was not your king. And therefore, you were under his frown, not under his smile. But now, to your amazement and delight, God has opened your blind eyes and a whole new world has been revealed.

and God has put you in this new position. And the great characteristic of this new position is that you are in the right with him. Your relationship to him has been secured for eternity.

[9 : 48] So whether you die at 90 or at 30 doesn't really matter. You know that the future is secure. Now let's look again at verse 22 to get our thinking as clear as possible about this state of being in the right with God.

because verse 22 I think puts it beautifully and simply. This righteousness, this status of being in the right with God, the verse tells us I think three things about this righteousness, this righteous status.

First, about its source. Second, about its channel. And third, its object. Just look at the verse with me. Its source is from God, this righteousness from God.

Its channel is through faith in Jesus Christ and its object is all who believe. So its source first, its origin is God.

God, in his infinite compassion and tenderness, looked upon the human race that he had made and everywhere he looked there was rebellion and anarchy and he was grieved.

[10 : 58] He was sad beyond measure. He felt perhaps what a parent feels who has a wayward child. The parent loves the child deeply but the child has become hard and cruel and utterly selfish.

The parent longs for the child to come to the door, to come home and to say to the parent, Dad or Mum, I'm so sorry for disregarding you for all these years and for hurting you times without number.

Can we be friends again? That's what the parent longs for but the child doesn't come and the parent quietly grieves. Now that's what God felt.

You begin to see it right back in early Genesis how God is grieving over the human race, how he looks upon every thought and imagination of the heart of man, Genesis 6, and he sees that it is all evil all the time.

But God, unlike the human parent, had the power to do something about this problem. So he sent the law.

[12 : 02] Now why he sent it, the Old Testament law, we learned from verse 20 here. He sent it so that we should become conscious of our sin. Through the law comes knowledge of sin.

So he sent the law so that we should stop in our tracks, stop in our headlong course and say, I've sinned, I'm in the wrong with God. So the law didn't put us right, it couldn't do that, but it did the first necessary thing.

It defined our position before God. It enabled us to see that we were in the wrong before him. And then God sent the prophets. Now the prophets were lawmen.

They taught the law, they brought Israel back to the law and they wouldn't let Israel forget the law. But even the prophets could not mend the broken relationship between God and Israel.

It needed more than a prophet to put things right. So God sent first the law and then the prophets as outriders, if you like, front runners.

[13 : 08] The task of the law and the prophets was to prepare the people for what was to come eventually. And then after centuries of silence, there came a voice in the wilderness.

The voice of John the Baptist and his message was cut a clean path, prepare the way, get ready, he's on his way. And then he came, Jesus.

And what did he do? He did what the law and the prophets had prepared us for but were powerless to do by themselves. He mended the rift.

He brought God and man so deeply estranged back together again. And he was able to do so because he was uniquely qualified being in his own nature both God and man.

Let me just run over this. It may be familiar ground but we can't in a sense be over familiar with it. Picture two sides of a great chasm. This chasm is so wide and so deep that nobody can cross it.

[14 : 14] It is, if you like, the great rift valley magnified 10,000 times over. On one side of the chasm is God and on the other side is man. Now how is it that with that huge estrangement, how is it that Jesus can act as the mediator and the reconciler between God and man?

He can do so first because he is God. As God he is able to bring forgiveness of sins.

Remember how again and again in the gospel story he said to people your sins are forgiven go in peace your guilt is taken away. Now his critics who didn't understand who he was said but this is blasphemy nobody can forgive sins but God alone.

Well precisely that's the point isn't it? It was their tragedy that they couldn't see who he was. And there are folk like that today who will say talk to me about Jesus the man.

I'll listen to that I'm with you but don't talk to me about Jesus as God because I can't accept that. Well such folk are still blind to the identity of Jesus. But once we see that Jesus is God we see that he is the one qualified to say your sins are forgiven.

[15 : 35] But Jesus also is man. He's not only the one who represents God to man he also represents man to God.

Now what was it that sinful man could not do however hard he tried? The answer is he could not keep the law. He could not fulfill its requirements satisfactorily.

At the end of the day even the best of human beings fell far short of the standard. As Paul puts it in verse 23 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But then there came the representative man Jesus. And just as David representing Israel stood forward and killed Goliath and saved his people and did for them something they were powerless to do for themselves in just the same way Jesus representing our powerless race stood forward on our behalf and did for us something that we desperately needed but could not do for ourselves.

He satisfied the requirements of the Old Testament law. And Jesus did this on two counts in two ways. First he obeyed the law.

[16 : 56] He never sinned. He never lied or stole or lusted or coveted. He loved God with all his heart and his neighbour as himself.

Now remember he lived this life of perfect obedience as our representative. We haven't done it. We can't. But because Jesus represents us God counts us as having done it.

But then secondly Jesus satisfied an even more exacting requirement of the law. the law requires that sin be punished with death. So Jesus again as our representative stood forward and bore the death penalty for us.

So God's thorough going law which we could not satisfy because of our moral powerlessness Jesus has satisfied fully on our behalf as the perfect representative of the human race.

So what has happened to that hitherto unbridgeable chasm? Well from God's side Jesus comes to man with the message all is forgiven.

[18 : 11] And we say can it really be? And he says yes indeed all of it believe it. And from man's side Jesus comes to God and God accepts Jesus because Jesus has satisfied the demands of the law.

but at the same moment God accepts all those whose identity is bound up with Jesus. That is to say all Christian believers because once we come to him and trust him we belong to him.

So Jesus brings forgiveness from God to man and obedience from man to God. So in the person and achievement of Jesus God and man are brought together thoroughly reconciled.

Now friends isn't that enough to make you jump up for joy? Now this is a church service we're terribly refined and polite and so on so we don't but I hope in your hearts you're jumping for joy.

What position are we now in in Paul's language in Romans 3? The answer is righteousness a permanent status of being in the right with God. So there's the first thing the origin of this righteousness is God.

[19 : 23] Now what is the channel of it to us? Well the verse says it clearly through faith in Jesus Christ. So obviously if we don't have faith in Jesus Christ this righteous status cannot be ours.

The channel is blocked. So let me say one or two very basic things about faith in Jesus because this is so often misunderstood. Do you know how people will sometimes say to Christians perhaps they've said it to you if only I had your faith or they might say to a minister you know I do minister I do try to have faith.

Now it's folk like that who misunderstand. Let me look at it this way. Do you believe that human beings have walked on the moon? Shake your head if you do.

A lot of unbelievers in the walking on the moon. Anyway I know that you believe that human beings have walked on the moon just as I did. Now if our great grandfathers our ancestors of a hundred years ago had been told that man would walk on the moon in 1960 was it nine?

69. If they'd been told that man would walk on the moon back in 1900 they would have shaken their heads and said impossible quite impossible but we have come to believe it.

[20 : 38] How is it then that we believe that men have walked on the moon whereas our great grandparents would not have believed it? The answer is that we believe it on the basis of evidence which is external to ourselves.

Now I believe it because I was alive in 1969. I remember seeing the TV clips and so on. The newspaper reports all the to-do-ment the coverage. My belief in that event was produced by the evidence itself.

Evidence external to me. I did not come to the belief that men have walked on the moon by looking into my own mind and heart. I didn't pace up and down my room day after day saying to myself Edward you must believe it.

Come on screw up your courage man. Screw up your mind. One, two, three, I believe. As though that kind of mental activity would somehow produce light flooding into my soul.

Not at all. I believed and believe that man walked on the moon because of events outside myself. Not because of some strenuous mental activity going on inside.

[21 : 46] That's just the same with belief in Jesus. People come to believe in him not by looking inwards at the state of their own psychology but by looking at him. If a person ever comes to me and says how can I have your faith in Jesus I would normally say I'd encourage you to sit down open the Bible and read one of the gospels because as soon as a person does that he's opening his heart and mind to the preaching and teaching of the New Testament which is all about Jesus.

As Paul says in Romans 10 how can people believe in the one of whom they have not heard? People can't believe in Jesus unless they've heard the facts about him and what those facts mean.

So when a person next says to you how can I come to share your faith or if they say I wish I could believe as you do why don't you suggest to them that they sit down and read one of the gospels and then immediately you're turning their attention away from their internal mental state outwards towards the external truth about Jesus and then the gospel is given a chance to speak to them and convince them.

Then there's something else about this word faith. One of the great themes of Romans is that justification being put in the right with God is ours through faith but we cannot earn it by working at keeping the law.

You see back to verse 20 for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight. That's simply impossible. So there's a big contrast that Paul is drawing between works and faith.

[23 : 24] But friends we do need to think correctly about faith because there's a danger that we come to regard it as a superior kind of work. This can be a danger for Christians.

So let's imagine we've got two men. We've got Fred and George. And Fred is asked Fred how will you get to heaven? And he says if I try hard enough if I'm a good neighbor if I do my duty towards queen and country and obey the law then I'll get to heaven.

Now if Fred speaks like that we know he doesn't understand the gospel at all. He thinks he can get to heaven on his own steam by trying hard and being good. But then we speak to George and we say to George George how are you going to get to heaven?

And he replies well I can't get there by my own efforts by works as the Bible puts it but I shall get there by my faith. It's faith that saves you not works.

Now has George understood? I don't think he has quite because he seems to be a bit proud of his faith. He says I shall get to heaven by my faith.

[24 : 33] faith. As though God rewards works with a place in heaven but he will reward faith with a place in heaven. Now that's regarding faith as a superior kind of work.

It's still looking at faith as something that you do yourself. God won't look kindly on my work says George but he will look kindly on my faith. Now look at verse 22.

this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Now I suggest that George is putting his faith in his own faith not in Jesus Christ.

Our righteous status from God comes to us when we abandon all faith in our own works and all faith in our own faith. It comes to us when we simply put our faith in Jesus Christ.

And you see what I'm saying it's really very important. There's no place for any kind of pride in the Christian life. If we really understand this we'll be kept humble.

[25 : 38] It's not our faith that wins God's approval and acceptance. It's Jesus who wins God's approval and acceptance. And God approves and accepts us when we lean our weight entirely upon him, upon Jesus.

To be a Christian is to believe that Jesus has satisfied the law's requirements on our behalf. So a man or woman who has faith in Jesus is a man or woman who looks thankfully at Jesus rather than proudly at his own faith.

It was beautifully put in the 17th century by Richard Hooker like this. God justifies the believing man not for the worthiness of his belief but for his worthiness who is believed.

So Romans 3.22 this status of being in the right with God comes from God as its origin through faith in Jesus Christ as its channel and then thirdly and very briefly to all who believe as its object.

Paul means all whether Jew or Gentile. The Jew has no special privilege. He is not saved by virtue of his blood descent from Abraham. All who are put in the right with God are put there in the same way and it is the same with us.

[27 : 06] All of us are on exactly the same footing with each other. You may be the son or daughter of a preacher. You may be the son or daughter of the most hardened atheist in Glasgow but you can only be right with God if you believe in Jesus.

So the person who is right with God is not necessarily the person who has been baptized or accepted into church membership. Not necessarily the person who has given loads of money to the church.

Not necessarily the person who has come to church all their life. Not necessarily the person who has been ordained or who has led a Sunday school or a youth group. There is only one category of person who can be sure that they are in the right with God and it's those who believe in Jesus who lean the full weight of their confidence upon him in simple childlike trust.

Now friends is that you? Does that describe you? Look at this lovely verse 22 and let's remember it and rejoice in it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, you are so gracious and compassionate to the undeserving and the sinful and that is exactly what all of us are.

[28 : 40] But we thank you for looking down upon the world in mercy and for sending this one wonderful saviour, your own son, who went to the cross and bore its shame and agony and suffering for us.

And we pray that you'll open the hearts of all of us here to put our trust in him. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.