



Some Really Good News

Lesson 5 | Romans 3:9-31

Paul began his letter by telling the Roman believers he had good news (gospel) to share with them (Romans 1:15-17). Then for roughly two chapters (1:18-3:20) he warns that all are sinners and will face the wrath of an impartial judge. “So what’s the good news?” someone hearing this message for the first time might ask. “Why would it be a good thing that God is angry against sinful man, and everyone is sinful?” It isn’t good news; it’s bad news. But the good news is coming.

Review: Why was God angry with the Gentiles? Why was He angry with the Jews?

Throughout Romans, Paul paints the picture of God as judge. The world, both Jew and Gentile, stand before Him having broken His laws. This judge won’t just ignore the crimes that have been committed; He won’t close His eyes to evil or look the other way. So if we stand guilty before a judge, how can we ever be declared innocent?

As we study Scripture, one helpful way to dig deeper is to see what words and ideas come up repeatedly. If, for example, you were to get out colored pencils and begin underlining words that appear several times in this section, the general theme of the passage becomes clear.

Have your group read through Romans 3:9-31. As you read through this section, which words do you see showing up repeatedly?

For example, we see the word “sin” or “sins” show up 4 times (3:9, 20, 23, 25).

We also see the words “faith” or “believe” 9 times (3:22 [x2], 24, 26, 27, 28, 30 [x2], 31)

We see the word “law” 11 times (3:19[x2], 20[x2], 21[x2], 27[x2], 28, 31[x2]).

Finally, we see the words “righteous,” “righteousness,” “just,” or “justify” 10 times throughout this section (3:19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26[x3], 28, 30).

This section of Romans is about the problem of sin and righteousness, and the solutions of faith and law. Paul will argue that we are all sinners, none of us are righteous – that’s the problem. We then see the solution many people try – being righteous by the works of the law, and we see the only solution that will truly work – faith in Jesus.

No One Is Righteous before God (9-20)

In Romans 1:18-32 Paul argued that the Gentiles stood condemned before God. In Romans 2:1-3:8, he argued that the Jews stand condemned before God. Now he sums up what he has been talking about and repeats himself in case anyone missed it: everyone, whether pagan and religious, everyone stands guilty before God!

Man Stands Condemned for His Sin (9-18)

Paul quotes Scripture to finalize the point he has been making throughout the opening. He has reminded the Jews that simply being Jewish doesn't save anyone – having the law or outwardly being a part of God's people won't make you right with God. Rather, what truly matter is whether or not we follow God's law. Now he is arguing that no one actually does keep God's law.

To do this, he heaps together several Old Testament passages from the Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophets. These passages describe everyone, even the very best of the Jews and even the kindest of the pagans, as God truly sees them.

As you look through this list, which negative attributes are emphasized?

What about people who look like really good people, do they belong on this list? (cf Romans 3:23)

Why do you think Paul begins and ends this list the way he does?

Man Is Unable to Keep God's Law (19-20)

So if everyone stands before God guilty, then why did God even give us His laws in the first place? After all, isn't the point of the law to make man right before God? Well, no, according to Paul that is not the point of the law. The law was designed with the opposite purpose – the law shows all men that they are sinners. As with many of the things Paul says in the early part of this chapter, he will expand on this idea more later (cf Romans 7:7-12). But for now, he wants Jews (and Gentiles) to know that the law doesn't show us how good we are, it shows us how much of a problem we have.

Why does the law make people more guilty before God (cf Romans 7:7-12)?

Paul has argued earlier that those who don't have the law are guilty because of the witness of God in creation and in conscience. So why add the law?

God Declares Sinners to be Righteous (21-26)

As we study these short six verses, we are coming to a passage that has been considered the very heart of the New Testament. Perhaps nowhere else is the gospel explained with such clarity and yet so concisely. Here Paul lays out how someone can be justified, or "declared righteous"¹ before God. God loves us and

¹ This definition of justification is very carefully worded and is the key difference between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics view justification as a *process* whereby God *makes* believers righteous. This means that you must cooperate with God by doing good works to mature the grace God gives so that you are righteous enough for Him to accept you. Protestants view justification as an *act* whereby God *declares* you to be righteous. This means that you don't cooperate at all in your justification, it is a free gift of God's grace. This matters because the question boils down to whether salvation is a matter of faith and works (Catholic), or faith alone (Protestant).

wants to give us the “not guilty” verdict, but in His righteousness He can’t overlook sin. So how can a just God rightly look at guilty sinners and declare “not guilty”? This is the question Paul sets out to answer (cf 3:26).

Our Right Standing Is Not Based on the Law (21)

Paul has made this point before (19-20) and he will argue for it further later (27-31). But as Paul begins this section he makes an emphatic contrast in the phrase “But now.” Something has changed. The salvation that God offers is not based on keeping the law of Moses, but the law of Moses (and the prophets) point toward it. In other words, what God is doing is new, but for those paying attention it was predicted by the Old Testament.

In what ways was the work of Jesus predicted by the Old Testament?

Our Right Standing Comes by Faith (22-24a)

Rather than trying to keep the law to earn a right standing before, Paul teaches that it is through faith in Jesus that God’s saving righteousness can be enjoyed. We are declared righteous, not based on anything we have done, but simply because we believe in Jesus. In fact, Paul is so emphatic here that he repeats himself – this righteousness from God comes by faith in Jesus² upon those who believe (in Jesus). Paul makes clear that this justification comes freely by God’s grace. All we have to do is believe, and God takes care of the rest. Yet many people struggle to accept that. They want to add something, do something, so that they feel like they’ve earned their salvation. They hear the gospel and think, “No, that’s too simple. Surely there must be more to it than that!”

Why is it so hard for us to accept that all that is required for justification is to believe?

Further, this is true for all – because all have sinned! Sin is a falling short of God’s glory, the glory that man was supposed to reflect when he was created. But rather than reflecting the good, kind, pure, and perfect God who made us, we have instead rebelled against Him. We who were created to represent God have decided we would rather be god and have lived for ourselves and lived by our own rules, rather than obey God. In this way, we have all fallen short of God’s glory.

Why does God set such a high standard – His own glory – by which He judges us?

Yet even in this passage, the focus isn’t on the fact that all have sinned, but that since all have sinned, all can be saved through faith in Jesus! All men – both Jews and Gentiles – are sinners. Therefore all can trust in Jesus and be declared righteous.

² Scholarship has gotten into a long debate about whether the Greek phrase “faith of Jesus” should be understood as “[our] faith in Jesus” or “the faithfulness of Jesus.” Both are ultimately true, as our salvation comes when we believe in Jesus (as the second half of this verse makes very clear) and is secured by Jesus faithfully fulfilling His task to die for the sins of the world. The question is which is meant in this passage (and other passages that talk about the “faith of Christ”). This lesson sticks with the classic understanding that “faith of Christ” means our faith in Jesus. See Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, 181-6. Schreiner concludes “Paul often refers to the faith of believers, he never refers to the faith of Christ, he writes specifically of Christ as being the object of believers’ faith, and the flow of thought in Rom. 3-4 supports the idea of faith in Christ.”

Our Right Standing Was Purchased by Jesus (24b-25)

If we are saved by faith in Jesus, the next question becomes: “Why does faith in Jesus save?” Two words sum up the answer we are given: redemption and propitiation. We are justified, or declared righteous, freely on the basis of God’s grace. But this justification comes through the redemption that is in Jesus. Redemption refers to a price that is paid for someone’s freedom. All of humanity is seen enslaved to sin, but through His death on the cross, Jesus paid the debt necessary to free us from that slavery. That payment, as we know from the rest of the New Testament, was the blood He shed on the cross. Through the death of Jesus, we can be free from sin.

What does it mean to be enslaved to sin? What does it mean to be free from sin?

We also see that Jesus was set forth as a propitiation.³ Propitiation refers to the appeasement of God’s wrath. As Paul has already emphasized, God is angry with sin (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5 [KJV “vengeance”]). This anger must be appeased somehow. In the Old Testament, propitiation happened when blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, but this was only a picture. In the New Testament, we read that Jesus was set forward, by God the Father Himself, to be our propitiation. It is through Christ’s suffering that God is pleased (Isaiah 53:11) and can rightly and justly forgive our sins.

Beyond just appeasing God’s wrath, what else happens when we trust Jesus? What other benefits come with our salvation?

Our Right Standing Proves God’s Justice (26)

So why did God do it this way? Why go through the trouble of Jesus dying on the cross and painfully paying the sacrifice for our sin? To answer the question that Paul has been hinting at from the very beginning: how can a God who is wrathful against sin freely forgive sinners, yet still be just? How can God both make righteous while still Himself being righteous? After all, if someone you knew was murdered and they were friends with the judge who simply declared them “not guilty,” you would be rightly upset. Judges who let their friends off are crooked judges. But God doesn’t let us off, and He doesn’t ignore the sin problem. Sin is addressed, but it is addressed in the death of Jesus for those who believe on Him. In doing this God is both able to offer salvation, and be completely righteous in doing so.

The gospel shows us the righteousness of God in taking care of our sin. What else does the gospel show us about God’s character?

Being Righteous and Following the Law (27-31)

But Paul knows that his Jewish friends will still have questions. What does all this mean for the law that they have been taught all their lives? Is Paul getting rid of the law? Does a Gentile who accepts God need

³ Propitiation is another place where recent interpreters have questioned long-held assumptions. Some have argued that propitiation is not the appeasement of God’s wrath, but is simply forgiveness from sins. Such a view desires to take wrath out of the equation and tries to claim that Jesus appeasing an angry God is a pagan conception. While once again this debate can get very technical, Paul’s repeated discussion of God’s wrath and his comments about the purpose of the gospel being to uphold God’s justice in justifying sinners support the traditional understanding of propitiation.

to become Jewish? Paul answers several of these last questions before he begins arguing for his case from the example of Abraham in chapter 4.

Keeping the Law Doesn't Make You Righteous (27-28)

Paul is reviewing what he has been saying so far: righteousness comes through faith, and not through keeping of the law. In 3:19-21 Paul emphasized that it is apart from the law we get salvation. In 3:22-26 he emphasized that it is only through faith that we get salvation. In this final section, he combines these ideas and makes clear that we get salvation apart from the law, through faith in Christ. No one can boast because all have sinned, and all have been justified by faith and faith alone.

Why do you think Paul keeps repeating himself as much as he does in this section?

God Saves Both Jews and Gentiles Who Come to Him (29-30)

One of the reasons keeping the law isn't the way to be saved is that God wants to save both Jews and Gentiles. Since the one God is God of both Jews and Gentiles, Gentiles don't need to become Jews to be saved. The Old Testament had predicted that God would one day be king over all the earth and had tied this to the fact that there is one Lord (Zechariah 14:9). Paul seems to be borrowing from this idea here and sees God's oneness as part of the reason that salvation is by faith, rather than through keeping the distinctly Jewish law.

Why do you think God wanted to save the Gentiles (nations) as the Gentiles rather than having them all become Jewish?

Faith in Christ Enables you to Keep the Law (31)

Once again, Paul is thinking about possible objections that might come up, especially from the Jewish crowd he wants to accept the gospel. The question here is a natural one – if you are teaching that salvation doesn't come from keeping the law, doesn't that simply do away with the law? As he's done before, Paul answers this question quickly and moves on, but he will come back later and deal with the problem in more detail in chapters 6-8. Paul contradicts this argument briefly here by stating that through the gospel the law is established. By this he means that those who put their faith in Christ are better able to keep God's moral law, although that keeping of the law doesn't save them.

Why is it important that Christians continue to live for God once they've put their faith in Jesus?